



Living With Crazy: My Experiences of an Abusive Wife

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Women are as physically aggressive as men in domestic relationships (Archer, 2000). However, this is not necessarily recognized, and men may be distrusted when claiming domestic abuse. Thus, as part of a series of articles, our purpose is to highlight the experiences of one male who experienced such abuse, detailing the historical underpinnings, the warning signs, the physical and psychological effect of the abuse, and the challenges and stereotypes faced by a male who makes such allegations. In this first article, warning signs prior to marriage are presented in addition to an explanation of how they may be ignored.

Key Words: domestic abuse, violence, battery, spouse, male victim

Part 1: The Honeymoon and Before

I could start by telling you about the two times she tried to kill me, or how she would occasionally assault me, her little fists or feet pounding away to little effect. There were times when she would hurt herself, convulsively slamming her head, knee, elbow, against the wall.

“Is this what you want? You want to drive me crazy?” she would scream at me.

Instead I’ll start with this very simple, very real fact; women are as physically aggressive as men in domestic relationships (Archer, 2000). For those who have researched domestic violence against men, this won’t be a surprise. For the rest of you, it may seem counterintuitive, and perhaps quite surprising. It is important that you understand this fact, because what comes next is only believable if you accept that women can be as psychologically and physically violent as men. Violence is commonly about control and emotional outbursts (Bair-Merritt, Shea, Thompson, Sibinga, Trent, & Campbell, 2010). In some situations, it can be used as the final means to resolving an untenable situation; the way a cornered dog might attack a bear with reckless abandon to the consequences, for example. However, in general domestic violence is used either as a means to control a spouse or by using the spouse as a means to control another area of powerlessness (Bair-Merritt et al., 2010). This is the way it was with Alex, my ex-wife. Yes, I changed the name, but some may appreciate the reference to *Fatal Attraction*.

The violence began over my sexual activity prior to marriage, and it began on our honeymoon. Alex was a virgin while I was not; however, she knew this going into the marriage. This simple fact brought forth more bile and venom than I’ve ever seen come out of someone, and I’ve seen *Jersey Shore*. During the second day of our honeymoon, she started to ask me questions about my sexual history. Now I was raised in a fairly conservative home in which, a) we didn’t talk about sex, and b) premarital sex was a slap to God’s face. I was ashamed of my past sexual “infidelities” (and this is what they are if you believe that God had intended only one person for you), and they were not something I wanted to discuss but forget about.

When I told her I didn’t want to discuss them, she insisted on the specific details, as if they were some sort of amulet to ward off the paralyzing fears in her head. She wanted to know what was done, with whom, and how.

I was savvy enough to know that more details only would make things worse. I knew that more details meant more things she could ruminate over, more things she could compare herself with, more ways to find herself lacking. So I held out, and she became enraged. “You brought all these women into our bed and you won’t keep this from me!” she screamed.

Trapped in a hotel room in a foreign country, during what was supposed to be one of the happiest times of my life, I was emotionally eviscerated. “How could this be happening?” I asked myself. When I didn’t tell her what she wanted to hear, she came at me. Liked a caged animal who breaks out to exact revenge against its captor; like the tiger Montecore mauling Roy, she came at me with arms swinging and legs kicking.

At first it didn’t register with me that I was being attacked, and for perspective it’s important to describe the scene. I am a former high school lineman and weigh over 250lbs. She was petite and there may have been 100lbs on her 5’4” frame. From an outside perspective it may have seemed almost comical to see such a small woman leaping on top of a big guy and trying to beat him down. Her punches and kicks were not well aimed, and even with her on top of me she was not able to actually make an impact. Although research on partner violence suggests that some males find female partner violence to be comedic (Holtzworth-Munroe, 2005), to me, it wasn’t so funny. It finally dawned on me that I was being assaulted when she started spitting.

For those of you who have never been spat upon, there is a visceral feeling of being degraded when someone spits on you. It’s doubly so if they spit in your face, and when your attacker is on top of you, there’s only one place where that spittle is going. The first time it hit my cheek, the total gravity of the situation pushed me through the bed, down through the hotel floor, the concrete, the bedrock, and down to the molten core of the earth burning like her rage. I knew then that I was in way over my head.

After she spat, I can remember rolling us both over so that I was on top, and holding her arms at her sides, and turning my head to the side (evasive maneuvers to avoid the spit-to-eye contact) until her rage gave way to tearful sobbing.

Through her tears she moaned, “Why don’t you love me?”
“I do...Alex what’s going on?”

I couldn’t understand what was happening and she couldn’t explain it to me. It made no sense to me. Alex’s back was never against the wall; there was never a gun to her head, but she attacked me because she didn’t know how to relieve her pain in any other way.

She would recover, her insecurities would subside, and we attempted to honeymoon. But, at least once a day, her insecurities would emerge in some way. Sometimes she would ask these questions during times when she wasn’t distracted. However, there were also times when we would be in a passionate moment and she would become lost to her nightmares. “Is this how you did it with her?”, or “She was better than me, wasn’t she?” were questions asked more than once while we were making love.

Alex’s insecurities were not always displayed through physical violence, but she would become overwhelmed. Sometimes out of nowhere she would start up about my past, and other times a scantily clad female on TV would jumpstart her insecurities. In those moments no amount of my reassurance would make a difference. I tried it all. The truth through phrases like “You’re the only woman I want.” and “You’re the sexiest woman in the world.” could not usurp the hold her fears had

over her. She was obsessed with her insecurities, and the depth to which she could feel them extended to the marrow.

The question this preamble begs is, “Didn’t I see this coming?” After all, this amount of crazy, or its violent manifestations, should have shown themselves a priori, right? Just like the research suggests (Lang, 2012) they did; however, I immured myself to them for “love’s sake”. Let me back up a little and explain.

Alex came to the US on a tourist visa so that she could serve as an intern at my church. At that time I was leading a college-aged group within the church. The first time I saw her was at a party to celebrate her arrival. I was at the party to seek advice from our pastor about a member of my group who was in significant legal trouble.

It was an Arkansas January, everything cold and soggy from long weeks of drizzle. I don’t remember much of Alex other than she looked exhausted from her trip from Brazil. She was a little dark-haired girl with dark circles around her eyes. It was not love at first sight. We didn’t have much contact at first, as she wasn’t a member of the group that I led. She was opinionated and quickly developed a cold war with another female member of my group, thus alienating her from my group. We were really only acquaintances until we took a 22-hour bus trip to Colorado as part of a church-organized skiing trip. It’s funny to think about, but I don’t imagine many romantic stories start on a bus anymore.

There were no open seats on the bus so we were forced to sit beside each other. We talked the entire way there, and I was surprised to find that we had many things in common. We both liked folk-rock musicians like Damien Rice. We were both interested in medicine. At that time she wanted to become a nurse in the US and go back to Brazil in order to raise the reputation of nurses in Brazil. I found this to be admirable. She was effervescent and easy to talk to. She seemed mature for her age and certain of herself. Of course, I would later find that neither of these things were true, but during our week in Colorado, we fell in love.

Alex came to the US somewhat coincidentally. In 2005, she took a trip to California and met a man from my church on their airplane. During the flight, he related that he knew a young man named Saul, and asked Alex if she would pray for him, as he was a soldier in Iraq. They met again at a seminary in Brazil a year later where she was invited to do her internship at my church. Think about those odds; really think about them. There are approximately 300 million people in the USA and 200 million in Brazil. There are millions of things you could discuss with a stranger on an airplane. That two Christians (from different countries) would meet on their way to California, that she would be asked to pray for me, and then they would meet coincidentally a year later seems impossible. It seemed meant to be. Looking back, this is one of my failings. I’m a romantic. Where other people would see chance or coincidence, I see providence.

Events like Alex praying for me or our sharing a row on a bus held a special meaning for me and would later hold me in my marriage. I viewed events like these as harbingers of our life together. I held them close to my heart and they defended me against my intuition telling me something was wrong. I thought I was where God wanted me to be, and if I just prayed enough and waited, every-

thing would work out. I told myself that the winds of time would sweep through, the smoke would clear, and the marriage I expected would be revealed. The smoke did finally clear only to reveal an inferno threatening to consume both of our lives.

The danger in romantic thinking is that it clouds the judgment. It gives us an excuse to ignore the obvious wrongs in our lives. In psychiatry, they would call it a delusion. A delusion is described as a false belief that is based on incorrect inference about external reality that persist despite the evidence to the contrary (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). It sets you on a path where every coincidence, every instance of *déjà vu*, has some deep, connected, cosmic meaning. It sets you up for failure, as you miss the more obvious signs that would normally save you heartache.

The fact that Alex couldn't get along with the other girl in my group should have been a red flag. Alex felt like the other girl should pray more during group meetings. I know that sounds like such an inconsequential thing (and it is), but because she didn't/wouldn't change, Alex stopped talking to her. Alex had many conflicts with people like this. She would find some slight, either real or imagined, and become fixated on it. As a consequence, these people would be dead to her.

There were other warning signs which I chose to ignore. The first family she stayed with while she interned in the US opened their home to her. They bent over backwards to help her. They let her live with them for free, but they did ask to know where she would be. This isn't an unrealistic request given that they felt responsible for a young female in a foreign country. However, she felt like they were controlling. Once she left their home she never looked back, and forever held a grudge against them.

There were times when she would become enraged and have a complete breakdown because something didn't go her way. A flat tire was a sign that God didn't love her and she would be ruined for days.

At one point she went through my Facebook postings. Now these weren't just the recent posts, but posts months and years old. Somewhere in them she found a sarcastic, irreverent comment I had made to an old girlfriend. It enraged her. What was feeding that search? Her all-consuming relationship insecurity. At the time my phone was off because I was in class. When I turned the phone on after class I had missed 33 calls, multiple text messages and several voicemail messages accusing me of cheating. Had I been a more self-aware person, I would have ended it there. But, I thought, she was "The One", like some kind of asshole in a *Highlander* movie. Thus, I apologized and spent hours combing through Facebook and email accounts making sure that I scrubbed them free of any hints of girlfriends past.

There were other instances like this, but it's my nature to give people the benefit of the doubt. She also had an indefatigable desire to control who my friends were and how much time I spent with them. If Alex felt that I talked to a buddy of mine too much, she might imply that we were gay or just complain until I caved in and stopped talking to him.

When Alex would go crazy I always tried to convince myself that her statements or actions could be attributed to a specific situation or were a reasonable, albeit extreme, response to some

slight from another person. She would often become angry with people and say terrible things about them. For example, there was a time when we were in church, and as churches do, they were highlighting an area of ministry; in this case it was adoption. They were showing a video of people in our church who had adopted, and were encouraging us to consider adoption. Alex became incensed. She started to mutter about a couple that had helped us in our marriage and told me they should stop being lazy and adopt. She went on to say that they weren't "real" Christians because they hadn't adopted. At first I thought she was joking, but she kept it up through the service and even afterwards. It was as if she felt put upon by the pro-adoption video, and was transferring this sense of guilt onto a couple who had invested a lot of time and energy into our marriage. To this day I don't know why she felt that way, and she never recanted or apologized.

After dating for six months, a major crisis in Alex's life developed. She had come to the US on a tourist visa to complete an internship for her seminary degree in Brazil. During the course of this visit she had been given an opportunity to stay and go to college in the US. Unfortunately, she had been given some bad immigration advice and as a consequence, was forced to leave the country. When this outcome was finally determined, she turned her focus into marrying me as an "end around" immigration.

I didn't have much objectivity, but I knew that neither of us was ready for marriage. I knew that making a major life decision out of fear is almost always a bad decision. Until the moment she boarded her airplane to Brazil, Alex held out hope that God would change my mind. He didn't. However, while she was "waiting" on God, she laid into me with criticism and guilt. "You're indecisive. You're not a real man." she would say, or, "God thinks you're doing the wrong thing." Let's not forget the classic line from every asshole who has pressured his girlfriend into sexual favors, "If you loved me, you would do this for me."

The worst manipulation was when she would quote people I respected saying that they were disappointed with my decision to not marry her. I knew that she was hurt and that that was why she felt justified in saying these awful things to me. But, the idea that other people thought I was wrong and were disappointed in me filled me with self-loathing and doubt. Alex said these things, knowing full well that she could do so with impunity. She knew that out of shame, I wouldn't check her story. If she had been quoting people I was close to, or at least people I was closer to than she was, I might have followed up. She knew better, and I didn't think to question it. In essence, I had a part to play in all of this and in some ways contributed to our dysfunction (National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence, n.d.). There is a common empathic reaction to someone who has had some kind of trauma perpetrated upon them. We attempt to make it "better" or "less worse" for that person. "It's not your fault." we say. "You didn't make X do Y to you." In the short term maybe it's okay to say that. Perhaps the objective is to prevent someone from feeling blame or shame for what happened; to allow them to heal from their wounds. But, from my experience, owning up and taking responsibility was what is sometimes needed instead of the "head in the sand" attitude. Taking responsibility allowed me to take control and become a better person out of this mire.

My main contribution to our problems was passivity. In my life I was taught by both example and by religion that the "right" thing was never taking what you wanted. To openly pursue what you wanted was greedy and selfish. I understood that to take what you wanted was a sin. To be honest, I

saw it as a virtue to choose last and to always put others before myself. Coupled with deep desire to understand and empathize with people, I was set up to fail.

Alex took root in this. Really, her brand of intimidation (threats and violence) only survives in a relationship with someone like me. A person who is assertive will either flee wrath like Alex's or their craziness will break upon the rocks of sanity. I too, like Alex, had questionable self-esteem. Mine played out in not getting help for us sooner. When Alex would crank up the crazy, I would tell her that we needed help. Her response was to, very easily, manipulate my insecurities, predisposition to passivity, and primary imperative to "do the right thing". If I would say that we needed help, she would say that she would call the police and tell them that I was abusing her. If she acted out in public, she would blame it on me and say that I had caused her to become upset.

If you were raised in the Judeo-Christian tradition, like I have been, then you may think that what I'm calling a vice (self-sacrifice) is a virtue. In my interpretation, self-sacrifice was deceptive. Not asserting myself was being deceitful and, moreover, it allowed me to hide behind the veil of moral superiority. I didn't take what I wanted therefore I'm not being greedy. I'm being selfless and by sacrificing myself, I was being a "good" man. Worthy of its own discourse, it's a blatant falsehood. While my part of our dysfunction was not as overtly wrong as Alex's, it nonetheless carries the same weight. Alex burned down our relationship with gasoline and dynamite, while I sat back and let it rot away.

Part II: Marriage and Misery

Deportation

One of the greatest tragedies of this story is the death of a dream: two partners weaving the tapestry of a life together. I don't miss Alex, but I grieve the loss of that dream. It may be I that put marriage upon a pedestal, the heights to which it should never be placed upon. I think the elevation of marriage in my mind began with my parents. They both came from divorced homes and knew the heartache and loss it caused. They wanted something different for their children and they have always held a reverence for marriage, even if their own wasn't perfect. And, then there was New Testament Christianity. Modern evangelical Christianity spends a disproportionate amount of time instructing on sex and marriage. They recognize the stabilizing effect that long-term marriages have on their church bodies and society at large. The church's view on an almost irrevocable marriage contract is reinforced with the rich symbolism of Jesus as the groom and the church as his bride. I was taught from the beginning that it was God's best to postpone sex until marriage. Furthermore, it was hammered home that divorce was only acceptable in the most grievous of circumstances; that is unrepentant adultery. Marriage was not to be taken, or dissolved, lightly.

In the 5 months we had dated, prior to Alex's deportation, we had discussed marriage. This

discussion was based on the understanding that there were things we wanted to accomplish first; college/nursing school for her and medical school for me. Marriage was a distant event, something that we would do once we had completed our education.

However, when Alex learned that she was to be deported, marriage suddenly became not just a discussion, but a necessity. She had learned that if we married, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services would permit her to stay in the US. And, if we didn't, she could be barred for up to 5 years from reentering the US. I went to see her every night during the weeks leading up to her exit. One night, a few days before she left for Brazil, I visited her at a friend's home that she was temporarily living in. When I entered the house, the lights had been dimmed and Alex called to me from the living room. I found her there, dwarfed in an oversized La-Z-y boy recliner, sitting on her legs. The ambience and her position reminded me of one of those movie scenes where the killer is lurking in the dark, like Chili Palmer from *Get Shorty*, for example.

"I've been praying and I know that you're going to marry me." she said in an even voice. In a slow, measured motion she turned her head towards me. "I've been praying and God gave me this peace."

In that moment, she had the calm of a serial killer and the fanatical certainty of an underwear bomber. In the four years that I knew Alex she was never that calm or certain again. She *knew* that I would propose to her that night.

She was wrong. I simply couldn't do it. There was something so completely, absolutely wrong about her push for us to marry. The impetus wasn't inseparable love or God's plan. It was to circumvent a legal system that Alex had accidentally crossed. When it came to marital discussion, there were never plans to elope to Vegas or the Friar's cell. I don't remember our conversation that night, but, I know I didn't relent. I didn't lie about my intentions either; I was direct and told her that we wouldn't be wed then.

My refusal to marry drove a wedge in Alex's well-planned agenda. Unfortunately for her, there were only a few days left before she was to be deported. Thus, she used whatever and whomever she could to guilt me into marriage. She told me that other people thought I should marry her now, and that I was being indecisive and not a man. She told me that people thought I was a liar and that I wasn't a Christian. Of course, most of these quotes were complete fabrications. Had Alex taken a different route and professed her undying love, declaring that no matter if we got married then or later she would make it work, I believe I would have married her then.

The subtleties of human interactions demonstrate the deepest parts of who we are and the respect we share for one another. They are the hidden glue of civilization, providing a framework for taking care of one another. For example, saying something as simple as "I'm sorry" can have a profound effect on someone's reaction to a tragedy. In many states, "Benevolent gesture" or "Apology laws" had to be passed so that doctors and motorist could express empathy without accepting legal liability (Caspar & Stallworth, 2012; Robbennolt, 2003; Zimmerman, 2004). With these laws in place, people were "allowed" to respond in the caring way they wanted to, and subsequently wronged people's anger was assuaged and the number of lawsuits and the amount of awards dropped. These sim-

ple social constructs, the simplest words, can ease anger and smooth over offense. With her thinly veiled manipulations, Alex violated them and something subconsciously told me to dig in and not marry.

I vaguely remember Alex leaving for Brazil a few days later. I saw her off at the airport and it was what you would expect from separation and an uncertain future; tearful goodbye and promises to call. She rode the escalator up and away, and my heart was broken.

There's a normal, healthy amount of guilt I should have, and did feel, when I let Alex go. I believed that she was the monolithic "one", my Juliet, my Maude. This idea carries with it a certain poetic gravitas... certain expectations; chiefly, that you will move heaven and earth to be with that person. I know this sounds like the romantic rhetoric echoed in every awful tween vampire book or homogenized pop song, but in reality it's one of the oldest archetypes (Bulfinch, n.d.). Since I was a little boy I can remember feeling a pull to find the one woman, that right woman, I was supposed to be with. This naive, deeply held belief would play a part in my undoing.

The Continental Divide

The following three and a half months, before we wed, were awful. I had to deal with my own sense of loss and doubt, which Alex compounded with her grief and constant derision of my decision not to marry her. "Everyone is disappointed in you." "No one believes that you love me." "They don't think you're a man." "When are you going to marry me? You said we would, but it's never going to happen."

I held out for a few weeks. I believed that what I had done was right. I knew that if we were meant to be then it would work out somehow. But, under the pressure of her manipulation, in my own weakness and romantic naiveté I caved. There was no proposal. There was only my, "I will marry you" and a date set. Although I should have been excited, I felt defeated in that moment, gravely resigned to follow through on a course I would not have freely chosen. It had never dawned on me that my "on bended knee" moment would come with a thud and not an echoing cry of celebration. I had dreamed up these elaborate scenarios of proposing. This moment was none of them. To Alex's credit, I don't think it was the way she wanted it either, and later during one of our arguments she would let me know that with a scream. But, she wanted so badly to be back in the US (or married to me), she wasn't willing to stifle her want long enough to get a proper proposal.

The months leading up to the ceremony were tumultuous. Alex stopped eating and became anemic. She didn't go outside much because she couldn't face people who questioned the existence of her American fiancé. She thought that her mother and grandmother were hijacking her wedding preparations and fought with them constantly. Marrying a foreigner in Brazil was a hassle that involved lots of paper/footwork on Alex's end. And finally, Alex was robbed at gun point. In Brazil it's custom to hand deliver wedding invitations. One day while doing this, she got out of her car and a "street kid" saddled up beside her on his bike. He pulled out a "shiny" revolver and relieved Alex of her purse. Alex not only lost her purse, but also control of her bladder. It was a horrible experience. This was the debris that littered the landscape of our imminent wedlock.

The week between when I landed in Brazil and the wedding was uneventful. Alex was dis-

tracted with last minute details and the focus was on her; which is why I think things didn't go off the rails until the honeymoon.

There were two wedding ceremonies; one legal and one religious. The legal wedding, a necessity due to my status as a foreigner, was held at the local federal building two days before the religious ceremony. The religious ceremony was a formal sit-down dinner wedding. The wedding hall was beautiful. It was painted white and there were bouquets of roses and candles suspended from the ceiling in such a way to appear as though they were levitating. There was an interpreter and two preachers. One did the ceremony and the other gave a sermon on marriage. A three-stringed instrument band played in the background. Alex was beautiful and happy. After the ceremony, as everyone ate, Alex and I went table to table thanking people for attending and auctioning off parts of my tie for honeymoon money.

From the wedding, her father and grandmother drove us to a hotel where we would spend the night before flying out to our honeymoon destination the following day. I remember Alex being fiercely angry that her father was driving us and not her grandmother's driver. There wasn't an explanation for her anger; not one that I could imagine nor one she could supply. She was angry, at the exhausting end of what had been up to that point a happy day.

Solitary Imprisonment

"You want to fuck her, don't you!" she half mumbled, huddled against me. I didn't think it was a question.

"What?" I said through a marmalade haze of too much TV.

"You want to fuck her!" The volume of her voice picked up as her body pulled away from mine.

"Who are you talking about?"

"That slut on the TV!"

She was referring to the Carnival drum queen on TV. The woman in question was nude from the waist up and be sequined with body paint and plumes of ostrich feathers radiating from the back of her keister and neck. Nudity and beautiful women are a common part of Carnival in Brazil. In fact, it's not uncommon to see advertisements with topless women during Carnival season. The samba school parades during live broadcasts are littered with dancers in various stages of dress.

I hadn't commented on the woman, and in reality it didn't fully register with me that I was watching a naked woman. We had returned to her parents apartment after the honeymoon and I was in that haze that can only come from watching TV and being completely unproductive.

"No I don't want to have sex with her." I said flatly.

"Then why were you lusting after her?!?" she yelled incredulously.

"I wasn't lusting after her. She came on TV and I was watching TV."

"You could've changed the channel."

"You have the remote control!" I yelled back.

"I don't care. From now on I'm going to cover your eyes whenever there are naked girls or sex

on TV!” she said with authority.

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen,” I said, as she began to become angry.

“See, you do want to fuck those girls. You do want to cheat on me,” she moaned in half-feigned sadness.

“No I don’t, but you’re not going to control me.”

“If you don’t want to cheat then you’ll let me cover your eyes,” she retorted.

“No, this is crazy. This isn’t how marriages work. You have no reason not to trust me,” I reasoned.

“You don’t call me crazy!” she screamed at me.

That’s when she started hitting me. Her little fists came at me but were easily deflected. When she realized that they weren’t connecting, she stood up on the couch and started kicking me. Her escalation required me to escalate. I wrapped my right arm behind her knees and bringing them towards me pushed back on her chest with my left hand. This had the effect of dropping her on to the couch beneath me. I held her arms because she was trying to hit and scratch me.

“Stop it! Stop fighting!” I said.

“Why don’t you love me and why are you cheating on me?” she railed.

She started spitting on me causing me to recoil. Then, she launched off of the couch and began storming around the living room.

“This is nuts. We need help, Alex!” I demanded.

“No you’re not going to talk to anyone” she screamed as she turned her head and started hitting it on the concrete wall.

She only did this twice before transitioning to slamming her knee into the wall, I think because the pain was greater than her desire to manipulate me.

“Is this what you want? You want to drive me crazy?” she screamed as she continued to beat her knee against the wall.

This was madness! I’d never had a very good analogy for the word madness, but this is what madness is; your new wife is barbarically hurting herself while violently declaring you responsible for her actions. And, how did I respond? I laughed. It wasn’t normal laughter but something more akin to the manic laughter of a man facing something that is both wholly beyond his reason yet comically absurd. She was hurting herself, and she was doing it to control me, that is for “interpersonal influence” (Allen, 1995; Brown, Comtois, & Linehan, 2002).

The effect my laughter had on Alex was to make her take the crazy up another notch. She stomped a meter and a half into the kitchen where I heard a drawer open and the reckless jostling of silverware. When she emerged from the kitchen she was holding up her shirt and pressing the business end of a large butcher’s knife into her stomach. She lacked the strength of her convictions to go perform seppuku. I should reinforce that these were half-hearted attempts at hurting herself. The goal wasn’t to hurt herself but more insidious. It was to control me. She was counting on my empathy and love, counting on them so that she could use them against me, to form the shackles of

my capitulation. When I saw the knife I sprung off of the couch and headed towards her. Subconsciously, I believed she didn't intend to really harm herself, but I also knew that the margin of error was thinner with a knife than it was when battering her knee against a wall. As I moved, she began to draw the knife's edge against her stomach like a bow against a violin string.

"This is crazy! You need help!" I yelled at her as I walked toward her. I intended to wrestle the knife away from her. "I'm going to have to tell your mom or grandmother, because you need help."

This triggered something inside her. I think the fear of being publicly shamed was greater than her desire to control me, because once I had said that she turned the knife towards me and began moving, ominously, in my direction. Her face contorted with rage as she threatened me.

"You're not going to tell anyone anything. I won't let you!"

The apartment we were living in, had only two exits and both of them were behind Alex. From the menacing look on her face I knew that she was no longer interested in hurting herself, and she was advancing on me knife in hand. I backpedaled to the only place I could, the balcony. We were on the eighth floor, and the balcony opened to an apartment building-lined street that led down to the ocean 50 meters away. I got out to the balcony and pulled the sliding glass door shut. She tried to open it, but I held it in place pressing the glass against its frame. She was cursing in a blend of Portuguese and English, as she locked the glass door from the inside and threw closed the drapes. I found myself alone save the company of the roaring waves pounding against the beach. It was raining, it was night, and the streets were empty.

I was locked out for two hours before I heard the latch click back. The door didn't open for me so I went in cautiously. We didn't talk. I don't know what you say after an episode like that. Even if I could have formed the words in my mind, exhaustion would have stolen them from my lips. This episode was never discussed until two years later during a "Peacemakers" counseling meeting in which Alex would deny that it happened, or rather deny that she made any threats to kill me.

Was she trying to kill me? It's a clear question with a difficult to resolve answer. However, given that this episode happened three weeks into a three and a half year marriage, it's obvious that I had to resolve it in my mind to stay in the marriage. What was Alex's intent? Intent is a mercurial thing and resolves only on personal disclosure and belief in the revealer. We can draw on context clues, but to truly know someone's intent we have to first trust that person and then have them tell us "why" they did it. And, since Alex never talked about this episode, I can only speculate at her intent. Was she trying to hurt me with the knife clenched in her hand, or was she just angry and happened to have a knife in her hand? Instead of injuring me, did she instead intend to manipulate me into apologizing, as is sometimes the case (Mechem, Shofer, Reinhard, Hornig, & Datner, 1999; McLeod, 1984)?

Alex had a history of manipulating me, even if I didn't always consciously recognize it. I think I know what intent to harm looks like. I've been in fights before and the desire to push my fists through someone's face was so visceral I could taste it. It's such an unbridled feeling, yet Alex's motions were controlled. I feel like she lacked the depth of feeling, the courage, to carry it through. It was all so contrived, like so many other things with her. The many times when she would try to harm

herself were always half-hearted. The pain of running the knife along her stomach would make her recoil before the skin was broken. Slamming her knee against the concrete wall would force her to the ground before she broke anything. I could of course just be explaining away her behavior and giving her a pass; displaying my own inability to recognize the truth, to see the capacity for violence in her soul. The truth is that women can be just as violent as men (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980).

There is the truth and then there is the way we perceive the truth. This is one of the reasons that eye witnesses are not always considered to be credible (Wells & Bradfield, 1998). I chose to believe that she didn't really mean the violent things she did or the hateful words she said. Whether or not I was right, it's the truth I saw in that situation. And so, I stayed. I had a friend once ask me why I stayed when he thought most people would be done. Would they be done? If you have this certainty that you're supposed to be with this person, that they are the "one" that God has chosen for you, would you so quickly give up on your destiny? Other issues also mitigated my response to her reactions. I felt guilty about my previous sexual history due to my Christian beliefs. I also agreed with her that gratuitous nudity shouldn't be on basic television. Of course, the way she reacted with all of this was wrong. But, I rationalized that with time her reactions could be changed or, at least, muted.

At the time, I had an unbreakable sense that marriage was forever even though 40% - 60% of new marriages end in divorce (Williams, Sawyer, & Wahlstrom, 2005). This belief is the strongest of all chains, one forged over years in the heat of dogmatic Christianity, and reinforced by parents who suffered the anguish of divorce as children. At that time divorce simply was not a possible option. You're suffering an affliction that has no conceivable cure, almost like the way medieval people suffered the plague and could not have dreamed of penicillin. Divorce was just as unimaginable to me.

Four weeks after our wedding, having been physically attacked, spat upon, verbally and emotionally abused, I returned to the US to resolve her immigration issues while Alex remained in Brazil. I boarded the plane having been put through an emotional meat grinder. Some might see this as an opportunity to have escaped, and perhaps it was. However, I didn't. And things got worse.

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