



Living With Crazy: My Experiences of an Abusive Wife (Myopia and Manipulation)

MICHAEL FARRIS AND TIMOTHY BAGHURST



In general, male accounts of female abuse in relationships are uncommon, not because they don't happen, but because men are less likely to express their experiences (Allen-Collinson, 2009). In this third installment of the frank account of the experiences of one male living with an abusive spouse, several key topics are discussed. First, an example of threatening suicide to control the husband is detailed. Second, the experience of being accused of infidelity in a public setting is recounted, and third, how pornography can negatively impact a marriage. These accounts, while individual specific, provide insight into the struggles of dealing with an abusive wife alone, the threat of being wrongfully accused of abuse, and the challenges and decisions that are faced when self-harm is used as a manipulator. The purpose, therefore, is to provide other men who are experiencing or may experience such abuse the opportunity to recognize signs in order to better resolve the situation.

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

I wish I could say those steps onto my flight home were my last in Brazil, that my marriage to Alex had been a shorter story, one punctuated by my return to the U.S. and a divorce letter soon after. But, I can't. Those weeks immediately following our wedding had been the most miserably confusing of my life. There were moments of love, but they were washed out by the ebb and flow of Alex's irrational rage and inconsolable anguish. Out of misplaced guilt because of my premarital sexual history, I had accepted the full blame of Alex's explosive insecurity. In doing this, I had legitimized her behavior and gave her free reign over my life. I would later learn that using guilt as means to control a partner is a common method abusers use (Anderson, 2003). I was naïvely resolute that once we were back in the U.S., together, everything would be better, because she would be where she wanted to be and her immigration status would be settled. It was with this perspective that I left Brazil in January of 2008 to begin Alex's "re-immigration process" to the U.S. and to take care of the mortgage on my house in the States.

During this time, I was working two jobs and I had time for little else, but Alex and I still talked via Skype every night. I approached these conversations with a trepidation akin to the way a child of an alcoholic creeps into his or her home at the end of the school day, never knowing what awaits. At first, the conversations were fun; filled with joking, talking about the day, and sincere pining for each other. During the six months we were separated, Alex kept a running photo album of split "print screens" with me at the top and she on the bottom. Anyone who has seen time lapsed photography of a puppy as it ages over a year into a full grown adult or of a landscape as it morphs through the seasons will understand the imagery of our own time lapse. In it you see Alex as she slips into social isolation and depression, her husband buried under the avalanche of her sadness and insecurity. Her inquiry "What's happening with the immigration process?" became "It's never going to work. I won't be able to come there, and you're going to cheat on me." "Tell me about your day at work?" became "You'd better not cheat on me with any of those women (co-workers)". She stopped eating and taking care of herself. That slide show of our Skype photos was an amazingly bleak movie of two people slowly becoming unwound. Our shared fear of the uncertain immigration process and Alex's insecurity about our relationship evicted the optimism that had occupied both of our hopes at the outset.

Alex's parents worked in Sao Paulo during the week and returned to stay with her on the weekend. I looked forward to those weekends because she would be forced to socialize with other people, even if she would rankle at their appeals for her to spend some time outside. There were many arguments during that time. Most were over contentious topics previously fought over, such as the likelihood of my infidelity, my assertion that she needed to get out and socialize, and the immigration process.

The Call

One particularly bizarre incident stands out from this period that highlights the dysfunction of our marriage. I had just found out that I had been accepted into medical school which was a momentous achievement for me. Being accepted into medical school is no small feat; on average less than 9% of those that apply to medical school are accepted (US News, 2013). Alex was the first person that I called to share my good news. Her response was muted, and not the *mudita*, or joy in others' accomplishments that you would expect when your spouse succeeds. Perhaps she was envious of my accomplishment or, more optimistically, she was wounded by not being present to join in on my celebration. Regardless, she was clearly not sharing in my happiness and excitement. Later that night, my oldest friend and biggest supporter, also a medical student, offered to come by and take me out to celebrate for a victory lap. Before he came by to pick me up, Alex and I had a

conversation on Skype in which I mentioned this celebration.

“Mark’s coming by to take me out to celebrate getting into medical school.”

There was silence on her end, and in the blue hue of the computer monitor I could see her head bow.

“If you go out with him I’m going to kill myself,” she said with a forced whisper. “What?” I asked, not hearing what she said, but wanting confirmation of what her body language was telling me.

“I know, if you go out with him, you’re going to cheat on me. I know he’ll get you to cheat on me.”

I’ve never cheated on a woman I’ve been in a relationship with. Moreover, I’ve never been inclined to causal relationships. Likewise, my friend, also raised in a small, Southern Baptist town, had similar beliefs. My point is that we were not going out to chase women.

“If you go, I’ll kill myself,” she said quietly looking directly into the camera. She floated up out her seat like a wraith, moving out of view of the camera.

“Alex! Whatever you’re doing, don’t! This is ridiculous, come back to the camera!” I yelled into the empty screen. My shouts were answered with a dull rustling from her kitchen. A few seconds later she dropped back into her seat. Without a sound she lifted her sweatshirt and slowly drew a kitchen knife across her stomach.

“Look what you make me do,” she said through clenched teeth.

I’ve never had someone hold me in place with their words before. She looked directly at the camera.

“I’ll kill myself if you go.”

And, I was undone. My empathetic mind knew that she was trying to control me, that this was all for control, but I was mired in the gravity of the situation. There are things we just don’t pretend because the consequences are so severe. You don’t yell “fire” in a theater, you don’t cry “rape”, and you don’t say “I’m going to kill myself” unless it’s real. Phrases like these are of such a serious nature that when they are spoken with the tenor of truth, they drive us to action, even to risk our very lives. When someone lies about these things they trivialize the best of human nature. Alex did not respect the boundaries of normal, human social interaction; she was willing to do anything to control me. This can be a sign of borderline personality disorder (Manning, 2011), which would later become more apparent.

The reality is that she probably would not have killed herself if I had left. But she knew me well enough to know that after her shocking spectacle, I wouldn’t leave when our video call had ended. Research supports my intuitive notion that Alex didn’t truly intend to kill herself (Glenn & Klonsky, 2009). Although it is not the most common function of self-injury, interpersonal-influence is what I now believe Alex was doing at that moment. Interpersonal-influence is the use of self-harm as a means to control someone else (Klonsky, 2007). This story demonstrates the dysfunctional way in which Alex sought to resolve emotional turmoil within herself. She sought to, and did, control me through dramatic gestures that she didn’t have the constitution to carry out and I didn’t have the strength to disregard.

This story illustrates how passive and people pleasing I was at that time. Mark knocked and I didn’t answer. He called my phone and I didn’t answer. He threw rocks at my window and yelled. And, I didn’t an-

swer... I don't think I have ever felt more defeated or alone at that moment, turning out lights and ducking below windows to avoid detection. She watched all of this on the webcam without saying a word. Mark eventually gave up on me and left. I had abandoned my good friend, my right to celebrate my accomplishment, and I submitted to Alex's unfounded fear. Alex watched all of this, neither gloating nor exhibiting remorse. Her jaw was clenched, brow furrowed, the face of someone who believes they are facing down evil. She truly believed that her words and actions were justified.

As we waited to hear from U.S. immigration, time seemed to stretch out like the desert before a thirsty man. It had been our plan that I would start medical school at the same time Alex was getting back into the States. After being apart for 6 months, we received word that Alex wouldn't get a travel visa for at least another 7 months. This was unacceptable to both of us. Despite all of the hardship I missed my wife and wanted to be with her. The choice to defer medical school was a natural one. It required no thought. There was no internal contention. I needed to be with her and medical school would have to wait.

There wasn't any doubt in Alex's mind about postponing my medical school matriculation, either. "She" had already decided that I would defer.

"I talked to the lawyer today and he said that it's going to be another 5-12 months before we find anything out," I told her over Skype.

"You have to come here. I can't do this anymore. You can't go to medical school," she responded.

I agreed, but she neither understood, nor respected the sacrifice I was making. Never did she say a "thank you" for my sacrifice. She never asked me what I wanted to do. I don't believe she ever considered what I wanted or what I thought was best.

It may appear that I'm being petty for calling her out for this. After all, I would be able to begin medical school the following year without penalty, and as I've said, I'd already decided to defer. But, imagine you have dream, a dream you've pursued for years, a dream that most people who try will never achieve. And then imagine that just as you're crossing the finish line the one person who should be your biggest supporter is trying to move the finish line further away. It was a personal affront, but I felt that saving my marriage was more important than my career. So I booked a flight for Brazil.

Back to Brazil

I deferred medical school and flew back to Brazil in June of 2008, 5 months after my post-honeymoon return to the States. I still owned a house in the U.S., and we needed a means to pay the mortgage. In Brazil there wasn't much demand for a non-Portuguese speaking American with a B.A. in psychology or Alex's seminary degree. So, Alex decided that we would work as English teachers. Did you notice who made the decision? It gives you some insight into "who" I still was at this point. Alex decided.

Now I have a sincere fear of public speaking, and English was always one of my worst subjects in school. Yet, my passivity was so pervasive that it allowed me to agree to employment that I knew I was woefully unqualified for. I didn't want to do it either. On reflection I can say that this passiveness was a manifestation of a greater lack of self-worth that extended into every corner of my being. It takes two to tango, as the saying goes, and an underlying theme throughout this marriage was my own self-loathing. Thus, I found myself in a room full of Brazilian adolescents trying to "teach" them English through games and activities. I hated it!

Alex had begun working at Cultural Norte Americano (CNA) months before my arrival. She found

out that there would be another North American teacher starting at CNA when I did. Her coworkers (mostly female) thought that it would be nice for me to have another North American to talk to. Alex, however, was convinced that this newcomer would be the physical embodiment of Barbie, with the sole mission of stealing me away from her. The reality was that this coworker was sort of Bohemian who had come to teach English only as a vehicle to experience Brazil. But leading up to my start date, Alex's worries increased exponentially and of course I heard about it.

"She's going to be perfect and you're going to run off with her," she told me on more than one occasion.

CNA is a franchise English learning school. The franchise in Alex's hometown was a two story, white, rectangle building. Our training was in a corner classroom on the second floor. Training centered around the teacher demonstrating a class lesson we had developed based on the school's philosophy and participating in mock classes.

Like so many things, when you do it for the first time you're awkward and awkwardness is funny. So we laughed. However, during this training and unbeknownst to me, Alex had snuck into an adjacent room and was listening intently to our training. When we took a break she pulled me into her room and began her inquisition.

"You're cheating on me! You want to fuck her! I knew this would happen!"

If I interjected or attempted to defend myself she would raise her voice. She could be audibly heard throughout the school, and out of a desire to avoid embarrassment, I held my tongue until I couldn't take it any longer.

"I'm leaving. I can't work here!" I yelled.

She grabbed my arm and pulled me away.

"You can't go," she said angrily. "We need the money!"

"I don't care. I can't work here now. I'm too embarrassed."

Her attitude softened, "I'm sorry. I won't say anything else. Just stop cheating on me."

I was speechless, trapped in the ridiculousness and humiliation of the moment. It was such a stupid and ridiculous statement that I just stood there thinking WTF? And, to argue would have just started the fight back up again. If this was to happen now, I would tell her to go fuck herself, but I've learned a few things since then (e.g., Desmarais, Reeves, Nicholls, Telford, & Fiebert, 2012a; Desmarais, Reeves, Nicholls, Telford, & Fiebert, 2012b; Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990).

Instead of doing what I should have done, I opened the door, stepped outside the room, hesitated for a moment, and then went into the room where the training was taking place. I don't think I have ever, or will ever be, as humiliated as I was in that moment. I was certain that other people had heard what Alex had said, not only due to her battlefield volume, but also because the school's walls carried sound like a band tour bus. My humiliation existed on many levels. Getting yelled at, in general, is embarrassing, but it was worsened by the knowledge that people heard her accusations and might subconsciously believe what she was saying. There was also the fact that I didn't really defend myself, because I didn't want to make a bigger scene, and the humiliation of allowing her run to roughshod over me even though I was innocent of her accusations. The worst part, however, was that I had to suck it up and go back into that room to face the girl that I had supposedly wanted to violate my marriage covenant with. So, I went back in the room, and the trainer and my coworker were kind enough, or embarrassed enough, not to bring up what had happened with Alex.

I knew only Alex and her family in Brazil and my inability to speak Portuguese further isolated me. It was ironic that in a city heaving with life I had no one to talk to. Moreover, the things I really needed to talk about in order to gain some perspective, I feared were too outlandish for anyone to hear without skepticism. I didn't think my friends or family would believe what I had to say. I was wrong, and even if I hadn't been, I've learned that if there is something troubling me I have to talk about it, as it is beneficial (Sousa, 2002; Zech & Rimé, 2005).

In this isolation, Alex discovered another form of coercion she could use to control me. During our frequent arguments she would occasionally hurt herself, as previously described (i.e., Farris & Baghurst, 2013). The result of this self-injury was generally insignificant, except for bruising. However, bruising was all she needed. It became evident after one particular fight.

"That's it. I can't take anymore. This isn't working. We need a break, and I'm going to go home for a while," I said.

"No you're not!" she cried. "If you try to leave, I'll call the police and tell them that you hit me. I'll show them the bruises and you'll go to jail." It's unfortunate but true that in these situations men are more likely to face charges irrespective of the actual event. For example, Brown (2004) concluded that men involved with disputes with a partner whether as alleged victims or offenders are less favorably treated and disadvantaged by the entire judicial system than compared to women.

A Third Partner

Alex and I were together in Brazil from June 2007 until January of 2009. In September, 2008, I allowed pornography to enter my side of our marriage. The specificity of this statement is to convey the point that Alex looked at pornography as well. Female use of pornography is not unusual. For example, almost half of young adult women watch porn at least every month (Covenant Eyes, 2013). It wasn't until the very end of our marriage that she admitted to having watched internet porn beginning shortly after our honeymoon, after I had returned to the United States. I relate this point not to shame or damn her for looking at pornography, but to highlight her hypocrisy and the skewed power dynamics of our relationship. She would let me feel guilt and shame over my own use of pornography, knowing full well that she was as guilty as I, and then used the guilt as another means to control me.

At first I looked at pornography as a means to childishly usurp the power I had yielded to Alex. Up until September she had accused me of looking at porn, but I hadn't. I started watching porn on the internet just to say, "Fuck you, you can't control me," but soon I looked at it whenever I needed to feel better. Keep in mind that during this time Alex and I were having regular sex. Pornography wasn't a means to meet a sexual need that was not being met as is sometimes the case (Schmidt & Matteisen, 2011). Rather, I believe it became a way for me to disconnect from Alex and also feel better about myself to get that euphoria that enabled me to distance myself from my own reality (Attwood, 2005; Nelson, Padilla-Walker, & Carroll, 2010).

There are moral arguments to be made against pornography (e.g., religious, objectifies women, depicts images that should only occur between married people, awful movie plot lines), but I feel that its greatest problem for men is it drives us further away from being social, and has been found to lower the relationship commitment between partners (Lambert, Negash, Stillman, Olmstead, & Fincham, 2012). It prevents us from getting our needs met in a pro-social more interconnected manner. Moreover, it encourages us to rely on fantasies rather than dealing with the obvious problems that prevent us from connecting. I would struggle with pornography throughout the rest of our marriage. It was a double-edged sword used to both passively take revenge on Alex and escape her. The impact of pornography on marriage extends far beyond my own. For exam-

ple, at a meeting of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, the majority of divorce lawyers noted that the Internet was playing an increasing role in marital splits, with excessive online porn watching contributing to more than half of the divorces (American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, 2013).

In November, 2008, we received notice that Alex's visa had been processed and that we would have to go to Rio de Janeiro for an interview. Although we both celebrated this news, Alex met it with pessimism and resolute belief that she would not get issued the visa. I was over the moon since I believed that getting us back to the U.S. would settle all of her fears and insecurities, allowing us to have a happy marriage.

The interview was held at the U.S. consulate in Rio de Janeiro. We arrived early and waited nervously until Alex's number was called. We were interviewed by a man through thick glass, his voice amplified and distorted through the microphone. The only question I remember was when he incredulously asked why I couldn't speak Portuguese. This question has stuck with me, and the answer was that the stress of our marriage had not only made me lazy, but also resentful of Alex's feigned attempts to teach me. I've learned from this that in those moments when I am stressed I can't surrender; I have to keep trying.

The result of our interview was that Alex would be granted a visa once we turned in the missing paperwork. This came as an outrageous shock to us! We had been reassured by our "Immigration" attorney that what we had taken with us was enough documentation to secure Alex's visa. However, the consulate interviewer stated that it would take several more weeks after we turned in the paperwork since we didn't have it all with us. We were crushed.

The day of the interview highlights one of Alex's innate abilities - charm. Prior to knowing her in Brazil, I had thought that her charm was a product of her being a cute, petit girl with a foreign accent and sweet nature. I was wrong. Alex was able to charm a document filer into giving us until the close of the day to complete the documentation that was required. We spent the next four hours dashing around Rio de Janeiro collecting the necessary documents. Thanks to modern technology, we were able to complete our packet and we celebrated back in Sao Paulo with her parents at a famous restaurant.

Alex's visa came through in late December and we flew back to the U.S. in late January of 2009, 18 months after I had returned to Brazil. Naïvely, I thought we would be returning to a better marriage. In reality, it was the beginning of the end.

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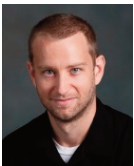
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Michael Farris is a resident intern at Oregon Health Services University. He is a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom III and an Eagle Scout.



Timothy Baghurst is an Assistant Professor in Health and Human Performance at Oklahoma State University. His primary research interests include male body image and more specifically muscle dysmorphia. He serves on the advisory board for New Male Studies and is the brother-in-law of the primary author, Michael Farris.

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