**Relationship Violence: The Secret That Kills 4 Women a Day**

by Liz Brody, Glamour Magazine, May 2011, [www.glamour.com/tell-somebody/2011/05/relationship-violence-the-secret-that-kills-4-women-a-day](http://www.glamour.com/tell-somebody/2011/05/relationship-violence-the-secret-that-kills-4-women-a-day)

He “threatened me,” “strangled me with a PlayStation cord,” “lunged at me with a pocketknife.” A horror movie? No, real life for far too many young women, an exclusive new **Glamour** survey reveals. Why is relationship violence still so frighteningly common in 2011? And how can we help? The answer starts with two simple words: *Tell Somebody*.

Not long before sunrise on a Midwestern Friday, college student and part-time waitress Alexandra Briggs sat in her one-bedroom apartment, meticulously applying thick makeup all over her face, neck and arms. It took two coats to cover her boyfriend’s teeth marks and the cigarette burns he’d inflicted, along with her newly purpling bruises; her pants hid the spot on her thigh where he’d stabbed her with a fork. When she finished, he drove her to the Original Pancake House for her 7:00 A.M. shift. “I’m sick,” she told her boss as she clocked in and headed to the restroom.

Briggs, a freckled, blue-eyed Beatles fan who was studying criminal justice, had first chatted with Matthew Hubbard over Instant Messenger five months earlier. After their first date, she hadn’t been interested, but when Hubbard, a fellow student, begged her to give him a chance, she did.

By that morning, she was barely a whisper of herself. As Hubbard would later admit in court, before Briggs had gone to work he’d hit her repeatedly with a small bat and strangled her until she slumped, unconscious—typical of the violence that had started a month into the relationship. “He had me in a choke hold against the wall, saying, ‘I’m going to kill you. No one will find your body; no one cares about you,’” Briggs, now 26, recalls. Dazed, she had agreed to Hubbard’s order to go to work, fake the stomach flu and return home with him. She was huddled over the toilet when her manager, Shea Duymovic, pushed her way into the stall and sat on the floor. “Look at me,” Duymovic said, her face next to Briggs’. “I know what he’s doing to you. And I can’t stand to see this happen anymore.”

A moment passed. When Briggs finally turned, she saw her boss’s eyes filled with tears. She remembers thinking one simple thought: *Someone cares?* Overwhelmed, she began to sob. “Do you want me to call your parents?” Duymovic asked gently. Briggs could only nod.

That day wasn’t the first time Duymovic, then 33, had worried about her employee. She’d weathered a violent relationship herself, swept into it young, as Briggs had been. “I knew Alex’s situation was getting really bad,” Duymovic recalls. She had seen the bruises on Briggs’ arms and noticed that she’d begun wearing glasses and heavy foundation; once bubbly, Briggs now spent most breaks tethered to her cell phone. “She came in and I could just tell,” Duymovic says. “I think she would have died if she had left with him.” And so Duymovic stepped in: staying by Briggs’ side until her father arrived, keeping in touch as Briggs recovered from her injuries—including a broken nose and ruptured eardrum. And the day that Hubbard was sentenced to 10 years in prison and the details of Briggs’ abuse went on record, Duymovic was there, cheering her on. As Briggs says today, “Shea was my angel.”

\*\*\*

Duymovic *is* a hero. But what she did is something each and every one of us can do—and must do. Because the violence Briggs kept secret is much too common.

The truth is, four women are killed *every single day* in the United States by someone they’re involved with. One year ago, on May 3, the world lost [Yeardley Love,](http://www.glamour.com/sex-love-life/2011/05/who-yeardley-love-really-was) a 22-year-old University of Virginia lacrosse player whose boyfriend now faces trial for her murder; he told police he shook her so hard her head repeatedly hit the wall. And the headlines kept coming, telling the horror stories of New York swimsuit designer Sylvie Cachay, 33, strangled and left in her hotel bathroom, allegedly by her boyfriend; Samantha Miller, 34, shot in the head on Christmas near a Tennessee Army base; Courtney Delano, 19, killed in Michigan when she was six months pregnant. The very day *Glamour* went to press with this story, Sarah Coit, 23, was stabbed multiple times, reportedly by her boyfriend, in their Manhattan apartment. “I knew he was going to kill her,” a former neighbor told the *New York Post*. And that’s just the tip of the iceberg: Over the course of an average year in twenty-first-century America, more than 1,400 women will be murdered by someone they’ve loved.

Most alarming, things are only getting *more* dangerous for some women: While overall female “intimate partner homicides,” as these deaths are called, have dropped almost 20 percent since domestic violence awareness began in the 1970s, a closer look at data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics reveals that, frighteningly, among women who are dating—as opposed to married—the homicide rate is *climbing*. “For girlfriends killed by boyfriends, especially white girlfriends, the homicide rates have actually risen slightly,” says James Alan Fox, Ph.D., a criminology expert at Northeastern University and former fellow of the Bureau of Justice Statistics, who analyzed the government data for *Glamour*. And the rates of violence for young married women are still unacceptably high as well: In an exclusive *Glamour*/Harris Interactive random survey of 2,542 women ages 18 to 35—single, living together and married—a full 29 percent said they’d been in an abusive relationship. Another 30 percent said they’d never been abused but then went on to acknowledge that, at some point, a partner had viciously hurt them: from verbal degradation to being strangled or threatened with a knife. That means more than half of all women have been harmed by their partner.

Why is this still happening in 2011? After all, as women, we’re clearly no longer second-class citizens, so dependent on men’s earnings and support that we must put up with brutal relationships simply because we have no choices. We have more choices than ever—and men are surely more enlightened. So why are women more likely to be killed by their boyfriend than they were 35 years ago? And what can we do to reverse the trend?

\*\*\*

*Glamour* is hoping to answer those questions. To honor the one-year anniversary of Yeardley Love’s death, we’re encouraging women to talk about relationship violence—both to ask for help and to offer it without judgment. Our campaign starts on these pages—full of real stories, hard science and guidance about exactly what to say and do. The most important step: Tell Somebody.

**Why Young Women Are More at Risk Now**

We’ve come a long way since the 1980s, when movies like Farrah Fawcett’s *The Burning Bed* helped break decades of silence about relationship abuse. Back then “everyone thought that domestic violence and rape were rare occurrences,” says Patricia Tjaden, Ph.D., who headed the acclaimed National Violence Against Women Survey 10 years ago. “Now there is a consensus among practitioners, policy-makers, researchers and the public that these types of violence are widespread.” And yet it seems that greater awareness hasn’t translated into a public condemnation of these crimes—instead, some days, our reaction looks like one giant cultural shrug. Consider Charlie Sheen, who apparently spent two decades pushing, shoving, threatening and, on one occasion, even accidentally shooting the women in his life—much of the time while enjoying his role as TV’s highest-paid actor. (“I will cut your head off, put it in a box and send it to your mom!” he reportedly said to his third wife, Brooke Mueller.) Mel Gibson pleaded no contest to charges stemming from hitting his girlfriend Oksana Grigorieva (“You f—king deserved it,” he ranted) and then went on to star in *The Beaver*, one of his biggest films in years. Over in the sports world, at least three players in the NFL alone were accused of domestic violence last year. It all maddens attorney Gael Strack, cofounder of the National Family Justice Center Alliance. “It’s like, ‘I just got charged with DV, what’s the big deal?’” she says. “In a lot of cases, there are few or no consequences.”

But cultural complacency may be only one reason relationship violence persists. New technology is playing a part too. For years experts have known—and told victims—that any partner who constantly needs to know where you are and what you’re doing is a dangerous partner, that such “monitoring” often leads to physical violence. But these days it’s become so acceptable for couples, colleagues and friends to text and email one another at any given moment that women may miss those early danger signs. What’s more, GPS and computer spyware are cropping up increasingly in stalking and dating violence cases. “Abusers can now be on you 24/7,” says Cindy Southworth, founder of the Safety Net Project, a team of experts on digital abuse at the National Network to End Domestic Violence.

\*\*\*

And believe it or not, in a hookup culture, some advocates worry that young women may be brushing off “bad boy” behavior. “A major misperception is that if the relationship isn’t serious, the abuse can’t be serious,” says Cristina Escobar, a spokeswoman for Break the Cycle, a dating violence organization for teens and twentysomethings. “Just because you’re hooking up doesn’t mean you’re not experiencing violence.” In fact, says Tjaden, “there’s more intimate violence reported in cohabiting couples than in marriages.”

Perhaps most surprising, some researchers believe that because young women today feel invulnerable in relationships, they may actually try to tough it out themselves rather than ask for help when things turn bad. “We’ve grown up in a different generation, where women are leaders, we have careers, children—we break glass ceilings,” one 24-year-old student tells *Glamour*, explaining why she spent two and a half years with a boyfriend who called her “bitch” and “whore” and, according to her police report, hit her and threatened her. “We expect to be strong and independent. When the abuse began, I thought, I can handle this on my own.”

In other words, it’s hard for young women to see themselves as victims at the hands of a man. “They don’t believe they’ll ever be an Ike and Tina Turner story,” says Kenya Fairley, program manager for the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, “because they see the initial incidents of abuse in the same way they see obstacles they’re tackling at work. So if a boyfriend criticizes her, she thinks, I can handle it, just like she does with her boss. Women today keep managing the abuse until they’re so far in they need help getting out.”

That’s exactly what happened to April Singiser, 22, a San Diego nursing student. Over the course of three years, she says, her then boyfriend threw food at her and held her hostage in his apartment when she wanted to leave. She told no one—not her family, not her friends, not her coworkers—because “I was ashamed and embarrassed,” she says. “I am not that type of person. I’m the person who always says, ‘I don’t care how big you are.’” But after she tried to break up with him, he forced her into her Honda Civic at knifepoint, and she had to face it: She might be strong, but at 6’ 5” and 300 pounds with a switchblade in his hand, he was stronger.

“He was telling me, ‘You shouldn’t have left me; I’m going to take you to an Indian reservation where I can kill you and no one will find you,’ and holding the knife to my throat,” she recalls. “I was driving on the 805 North, bawling, thinking, How am I going to get out of this? Should I just crash the car on his side?” When, at his direction, she got off the freeway, they hit a red light. Singiser sprang out, raced to the car behind her and banged on the windows. “He’s going to kill me!” she screamed. It was literally the first time she’d ever asked for help.

\*\*\*

Singiser’s ex is now in jail; he gets out next February. She is worried—on his Facebook profile, his interests include “Gettin Even”—but she’s also thriving, going to school and working as a medical assistant. “Even though I thought I could handle it,” she says of her early reluctance to talk about her situation, “I obviously couldn’t.”

**Why Doesn’t She Just Leave?**

Perhaps the most nagging question about this issue is, Why do women stay? Some of the reasons are the age-old ones: Love, as uncomfortable as it is to confront, was the top answer from women in our survey when asked why they had not left an abusive partner. And research is proving exactly how emotional and physical abuse physiologically changes the brain. Using MRI scans, neuroscientists like Alan Simmons, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of California, San Diego, have found that repeated abuse makes a victim more prone to being withdrawn, forgetful and so stuck in negative thinking that she can’t even see how a situation could improve. Many survivors look back and say they were in a fog; often the phrase is “I lost myself.” “There is something biological,” says Simmons. “It’s not a sign of weakness. It’s akin to what happens to the brain during war.”

This rings true for Reena Becerra, 38, a Ph.D. student in clinical psychology, whose then boyfriend, Mike Vargas, once bashed her head against the linoleum floor and strangled her. (Despite that and his 18 prior incidents, he got five years’ probation and no jail time—shockingly not atypical in these cases.) “People think, You don’t have kids, you’re a beautiful girl—what’s keeping you with him?” she says. “Well, I started out a confident, strong girl. Five years of someone telling me, ‘If you just shut up, I wouldn’t have to hit you,’ and I started thinking, Maybe I *should*s shut up.”

Rene Renick, a vice president at the National Network to End Domestic Violence and a counselor for 20 years, sees women like Becerra all the time. “You become isolated, and the only feedback you’re getting is from this guy who’s giving *really* distorted messages, like ‘You caused this,’ which gets inside your head,” Renick says. “You fall in this cycle of believing that if you caused the violence, you can stop it, which you can’t—only he can.”

**Speak Up—It Really Matters**

Vanessa Saulter, 37, thanks God every day that she told her friends about the violence her on-again, off-again boyfriend put her through, and that they stuck by her. Longtime pal 32-year-old Janet McKnight may have even saved her life one night.

\*\*\*

As Saulter remembers it, that early spring evening started off well enough. She and her boyfriend were hanging out at her apartment, but his mood veered after an argument in which he accused her of cheating. In what became a deranged marathon of violence, he punched and choked Saulter until at one point she looked out the window of her third-story bedroom and—fell? jumped? she’s not sure—but somehow found herself, one sneaker on, plunging three stories through the midnight air.

When she came to on the parking lot cement, “he told me, ‘I can leave you here, or I can take you back upstairs,’” says Saulter, now a resident director at Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina. “I couldn’t feel my legs. I knew I needed help.” He carried her to her bed but instead of calling 911, continued to torture her for another 12 hours. Sometime the next morning, he hacked off her hair.

Meanwhile, McKnight was trying desperately to reach Saulter; knowing about the violence, she always worried when Saulter didn’t answer her calls immediately. Frantic, she phoned Saulter’s parents and urged them to hurry to the apartment. When McKnight got there herself, she says, “I saw her hair everywhere, holes in the wall, blood. And I was thinking, What *happened* to her?”

Saulter’s family rushed their daughter to the hospital; she had multiple rib fractures, a collapsed lung and “she’d broken her back in two bad places,” says her doctor, Leonard Nelson, M.D. “It takes an unusual amount of force to do that.”

After more than a year, Saulter got back on her feet, both physically and emotionally. “Honestly, I thought I would *never* get to the point where I could leave,” she says, giving full credit to her friends for their support. “They saw the signs from the beginning. They would tell me I would go missing and my picture would end up on a milk carton. Over time, it slowly sank in.”

It *does* sink in, say experts. “If others can continually counter with messages like ‘It’s not you. You didn’t cause this. This is not a normal relationship,’” says Renick, “they can help women escape the abuser’s reality.”

That’s exactly the script Ashia Troiano, 21, a recent Swarthmore College graduate, used with her best friend, Quasona Cobb, also 21. “There were plenty of times where I was like, ‘This isn’t healthy—you’re not even happy,’” she says of Cobb’s relationship with boyfriend Keith Bailey and his ongoing brutality.

Cobb, a hotel administrative assistant and college student in New York, eventually came to the same conclusion herself; last December, she demanded that Bailey move out. Troiano stood by her—and is still her rock through the even darker time that has followed. One night before Bailey left, as Cobb later told police, he pulled out a chunk of her hair and dragged her down the hall; then, planting his foot on her stomach and holding a lighter in one hand, he started dousing her with her own aromatherapy oil. Vanilla, maybe, or grapefruit. She realized, with horror, what he was about to do. “I was screaming. I was begging, ‘Please do not set me on fire. I’ll do anything you want, OK? I’ll stay with you,’” she recalls. He finally calmed down and fell asleep. Immediately, Cobb texted Troiano: *Be here at 7:30 in the morning to help me move out.* Bailey would leave for work by then.

\*\*\*

When Troiano arrived, the two threw some clothes in a bag for Cobb and went straight to the 42nd Precinct to file a police report. And then Cobb called her mom, Arlene Gordon, a 42-year-old assistant analyst for Con Edison. Although they talked five times a day, Cobb had never told her mother about Bailey’s rages. Now she did, and they agreed that Cobb shouldn’t see her boyfriend again; instead, Gordon, a fierce mama-bear type, would supervise Bailey as he cleared his belongings out of her daughter’s apartment. Cobb urged her to go with a male relative, but Gordon said no, she could take care of this herself. Cobb called and talked to her mother at the apartment around 4:30. When she phoned again at 5:01, no answer; 5:10, nothing. So Cobb dialed 911.

At 7:30 she heard. Cobb says police had found her mother facedown on the bed, set afire—the heat so intense, a garbage bag over her head had melted into her hair. She was alive, but barely. Her head had been crushed by a heavy object, Cobb says. The only thing untouched were her perfectly pedicured red toes.

“That was the hardest night,” says Cobb. “I wanted to die myself. You go through the blame—Why didn’t I go with her?”

Five months later, Gordon remains in the hospital. At press time, she has said just two words, but two words of a fighting spirit: “I want.” Bailey, for his part, faces 10 counts, including arson and attempted murder of Gordon.

The two friends are still in constant contact. They’re struggling with their guilt, but Cobb reassures Troiano that she’s saved at least one life. “Ashia is my she-ro,” she says. “I tell her every day: ‘You are the best friend in the whole wide world.’”

**Here’s What *You* Can Say**

Over the five years that Cobb stayed with her boyfriend, Troiano never stopped talking to her about what was going on. But many people—37 percent in *Glamour*’s survey—don’t reach out to a friend or acquaintance if they suspect abuse. It is hard to know what to say, but here are some of the exact phrases that helped 50 survivors we interviewed with the help of the National Family Justice Center Alliance:

**“I am afraid for you.”** Nicole Van Winkle, 24, heard these words after confiding to an old friend that she worried her boyfriend would hit her if she didn’t return his calls. “She said it wasn’t OK, but she didn’t judge me,” says Van Winkle. “She just listened—and that really helped.”

**“You’re not leaving until I take pictures.”** A friend said this to Yvonne Coiner, 44, after she spotted Coiner’s bruises one day. The friend gave the photos to a counselor, who told Coiner that she wasn’t safe. “I needed to hear that,” Coiner says, “because when you’re in the abuse, you’re paralyzed.”

\*\*\*

**"I am proud of you.”** After Petra Johansson, 39, filed for divorce from her abusive husband, her friend sent her that text. “I’ll never forget it,” she says, “and during bad times I’d pull it up again, reread it and be able to go on.”

**“I’m sorry, but honey, if he’s hit you once, he’ll hit you again.”** A friend said this to Jennica Tulao, 25, after noticing her bruises. “I’d told her I wanted to give him another chance,” says Tulao. “That’s when she said the thing about hitting. It was one of the turning points for me.”

**“Do you want your kids to go through that?”** Ashley Raymer’s dad asked that question when she came back home after a fight with her boyfriend. “I really wanted to be a mom,” says Raymer, 24, “and that stayed with me.”

**“I can prosecute a felony DV charge with you alive—or wait until you’re dead and prosecute a felony murder charge.”** Reena Becerra, 38, was considering going back to her abuser when the district attorney said this. “It was the wake-up call I needed,” she says. “I thought I was in danger; I just didn’t know how much.”

Many of the survivors we spoke to acknowledged just how tough it is for a friend to step in but said that having a caring, nonjudgmental supporter was nothing short of lifesaving. “Even if it doesn’t happen overnight,” stresses Renick, “the victim will say, ‘You know, someone told me, “That isn’t OK,” and it took me six months, but it planted a seed.’ It helps women begin to think about leaving a relationship.”

And saying something—even an awkward, uncomfortable something—is always better than saying nothing. “So many women think there’s no way out,” says Sue Else, president of the National Network to End Domestic Violence. “If every woman who reads this says something, the ripple effect will be unbelievable.”

As Vanessa Saulter, whose circle of female friends never gave up on her, puts it: “Along with my family and faith, my close friends are 100 percent responsible for the fact that I’m finally free.”

**How you can help: Text TELLNOW to 85944 to make a $10 donation that will go toward keeping a domestic violence hotline open. The Avon Foundation will match every dollar you donate up to $200,000.** [**Find out more about our texting campaign**](http://www.glamour.com/tell-somebody/2011/05/how-you-can-help-put-a-stop-to-relationship-violence)**.**

*Liz Brody is* Glamour*’s editor at large. For more resources on how to help, to share your story or to see video accounts from survivors, go to* [*glamour.com/go/tell-somebody*](http://www.glamour.com/tell-somebody)*.*