

The Hidden Danger of Breakups

She was 19, smart, and popular; he was a 21-year-old honors student. They seemed like a great couple...until they broke up and he allegedly exploded in a violent rage that ended in murder. Here's the little-known risk that comes with leaving a guy who doesn't want to let go.

By Gini Sikes



emily silverstein

Courtesy of Bob Silverstein

Maggie Mulderrig remembers looking around the packed auditorium this past April, mentally checking off which of her friends were there. Students had gathered at the request of the president of Gettysburg College, in Pennsylvania, to hear a disturbing announcement: One student had brutally killed another, but police still had not released the names. A feeling of dread rose in Maggie as she realized her friend Emily Silverstein wasn't in the crowd. Anyone close to Emily would understand: Kind almost to a fault, she'd normally have been there, trying to console people. It was frighteningly strange that she was missing.

Her heart pounding, Maggie ran across campus to Peace House, where Emily lived, a large brick building that housed students dedicated to pacifist causes. She found it deserted, nearly everyone gone for the approaching Easter break. "Emily's door was open, and all her stuff untouched," Maggie says. "Nothing was different. Yet looking at that empty room, I knew."

Meanwhile, Gettysburg senior Theresa (not her real name) left the assembly early, got in her car, and headed home for the break. "I assumed the killing was a drunken act; perhaps something went horribly wrong between two frat brothers," she recalls. Driving off campus, she saw barricades on Carlisle Street, where her good friend Kevin Schaeffer lived with two roommates. Crime-scene tape

fluttered in the breeze. Concerned, Theresa tried phoning Kevin several times, but he didn't respond. "As time went on," she says, "I realized there must be a reason he wasn't answering."

At a press conference that afternoon, Adams County District Attorney Shawn Wagner finally announced the victim: Emily Silverstein, a 19-year-old sophomore. Her alleged killer, Kevin Schaeffer, was 21 and a month away from graduation. The two had broken up three weeks earlier, agreeing to remain friends.

When Rejection Triggers Rage

The news seemed incredible. Both were well-liked, with a wide circle of mutual friends. Soft-spoken but with a sharp sense of humor, Kevin was a campus deejay and a history major. His name appeared in the newspaper for making the honor roll and for his arrest on murder charges only a few weeks apart. Usually boyish-looking, he is ashen in his mug shot, with dark circles underscoring heavy-lidded eyes.

Emily was outgoing and passionate, known around campus not only for her political activism but also for the funky glasses she sometimes wore and the 1997 Ford that she decorated inside with Bob Dylan lyrics. She was devoted to causes like Amnesty International and Free the Children.

The autopsy revealed that Emily, 5 feet 4 and 115 pounds, had been both choked and stabbed. The coroner concluded that she was still alive when her killer drove a 5-inch knife blade into her throat.

"I keep wondering what would have happened if Emily had grabbed a girlfriend when she went to Kevin's," Theresa says. "The fact she went alone seems like she wasn't afraid. I never saw Kevin angry with Emily. I never saw him really angry, period."

In the aftermath of the murder, local women's groups offered students counseling on violent relationships... but if Kevin had physically abused Emily, she'd told no one. "This opened the eyes of many to domestic violence, which is good, but I don't believe Emily's case is an example," says Antonia Hernandez, a close friend. "She was excited to date him, never complained. If something major happened, I think I would have known." Emily's father, Bob Silverstein, told a newspaper reporter he didn't think Kevin had ever hit his daughter.



But shockingly, the period surrounding a breakup is when a relationship that was never physically abusive before can explode into murderous rage, says Jennifer Storm, the executive director of a victim/witness assistance program in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, who lectured about dating violence on the Gettysburg campus only a week before Emily died. "In about 20 percent of relationship homicides," explains Storm, "the killing itself was the first act of violence."

In many such cases, she adds, the man uses emotional blackmail to keep a woman with him, and as long as that works, he doesn't need to resort to physical force. "But if crying, playing on her guilt, or threats fail," says Storm, "he may lash out from fear and loss of control."

emily silverstein

Courtesy of Bob Silverstein

That swift, out-of-the-blue violence can be extremely difficult to predict, according to Laura Dugan, PhD, associate professor of criminology and criminal justice at the University of Maryland. "Most people become upset during a breakup," she says, "and lots of guys are needy and manipulative, but they don't commit murder."

Experts say a guy who suddenly transforms from insecure to murderous could be called a timid killer: someone who, far from seeming violent or disturbed, is normally peaceful, even gentle...until rejection triggers deep-seated fears or urges.

Certainly, in the case of Kevin and Emily, there were no obvious warning signs that both their lives were about to be destroyed.

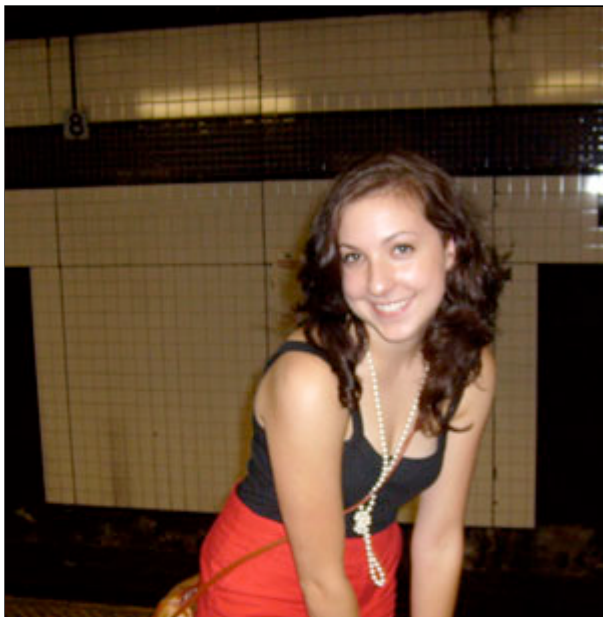
The Guy She Fell For

Emily was the daughter of activist parents (at 10, she declared herself a vegetarian) and grew up in the small, liberal town of Roosevelt, New Jersey. She arrived at college in Gettysburg ready to change the world. "I decorated my side of our room pink," recalls Maggie, her freshman dormmate. "Emily hung a poster of a lethal-injection table she got at an anti-death penalty rally."

Guys had crushes on her, but Emily usually didn't take it too seriously. "None of us came here to get married," says Noor Oweis, one of her best friends. "We have male friends who are very dependable, very protective, and genuine."

Among them was Kevin Schaeffer. A senior with a liking for skinny jeans and indie bands, he and Emily began dating in the fall of 2008. He was only her second serious boyfriend. "Music was her passion, and he was a deejay," recalls her father, Bob. "She loved movies, especially foreign films, and he introduced her to new ones."

Both were hardworking, on financial aid and scholarships, and Kevin earned extra money managing the college radio station. Though not an activist, he shared Emily's concerns, and she inspired him to consider the peace corps after graduation. "He seemed the perfect complement to her," Antonia says.



His Secret History

But after a while, Emily began to find Kevin too needy, and their relationship shifted into off-and-on mode. "They were having a difficult time," Antonia remembers. "She and I had a heart-to-heart. She was about to turn 20, and he was graduating. They either took things to the next level together or moved on. Emily had always been focused, but when things got rocky with Kevin, she started feeling stressed and worried that she was making poor choices; she'd missed some classes. She felt they were hurting each other."

Emily broke things off in March, intending to stay friends. Kevin e-mailed her incessantly. In one

emily silverstein
Courtesy of Bob Silverstein

message, he worried about his thesis, pressing her to help. Then his obsession swelled into talk of suicide. "Emily was tormented," her father says. "She tried to help him move on. Her concern was that Kevin not take his own life."

Then Emily and her friends learned through acquaintances that a year earlier, Kevin had fixated on a previous girlfriend, Jane (not her real name). When they met with her, Jane described a young man frantic for someone to love him. During summer break, if they didn't speak on the phone three times a day, he cried until Jane apologized and agreed to talk.

At school, Kevin insisted they meet after class, eat all meals together, and do homework side by side. Eventually, she started texting him even before taking a nap. Otherwise, she woke up to multiple voice mails. "Once, I turned my phone back on, and there were 12 consecutive messages from him, crying and screaming that I was abusive," Jane says.

As with Emily, Kevin never physically threatened Jane, only himself. "He trapped me in his room in this way — he said if I left, he would kill himself," she recalls.

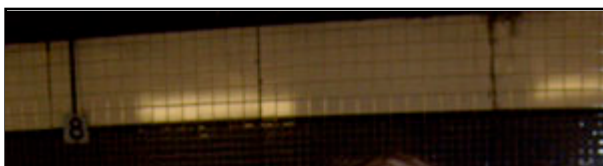
Determined to end their relationship yet terrified of doing so while Kevin appeared suicidal, Jane finally sought help from campus counseling services. If she complained of further menace, they would seek a restraining order. Shortly afterward, Kevin left school for two weeks, and friends assumed he'd had therapy. "He never talked about what happened," Theresa says, "so we figured it was best just to spend time with him and keep him upbeat."

Jane believes Kevin kept this side completely hidden. "His closest friends didn't know how obsessive he was because he had, essentially, two lives," she says. "For all they knew, he had just been getting emotional because he liked his girlfriend a lot. I don't think his friends came close to knowing the real Kevin. I'm sure it was great to be friends with him, but to be the object of his 'love' and obsession was the worst place in the world."

Although Kevin's personality didn't mirror the stereotype of an abusive boyfriend, threatening suicide is among the classic red flags that someone could become violent, according to David Adams, EdD, author of *Why Do They Kill? Men Who Murder Their Intimate Partners* and codirector of Emerge, the first program in the United States to counsel abusive men. "They get locked into conversations where the guy says he'll kill himself," Adams explains. "It's a desperate strategy to keep the relationship going. He's manipulatively given her life-or-death power over him."

But there is a grim truth behind that strategy: Many of the killers Adams interviewed said they had initially intended to kill themselves in front of their victim, in order to leave her with eternal guilt. Then rage took over, and they killed her instead. "Such men feel: 'By rejecting me, you have destroyed me, so I have to destroy you,'" says Adams. And in fact, often both people die: Thirty percent of men who murder their intimate partner then commit suicide.

Despite Jane's urging that Emily seek help from the school, Emily concluded that Kevin wasn't the type to actually harm himself or her. "Emily possessed this mature sense of forgiveness," says Maggie. "She'd say, 'Better to let it go. Life is too short.'"



If He Couldn't Have Her...

Three weeks after Emily broke it off, Kevin and friends celebrated the upcoming Easter break at

a favorite bar, swapping jokes and plans for the future. "He was excited about a road trip to see Elvis Presley's hometown," remembers one friend. "Then I brought up how strange it is that so much violence occurs in April: Columbine, Virginia Tech, the Oklahoma City bombing. Kevin kept agreeing, saying, 'It's just so messed up.' He was genuinely concerned. Typical Kevin." Around 1 a.m., the crowd broke up. Kevin hugged everyone good-bye. Friends say that he wasn't drunk and he seemed happy.

Earlier that evening, Emily had led a discussion on gay rights at Peace House, then went to the library and finally back to her room, where she texted Noor to say *good night*, ending her message with "I'll call you tomorrow." Those are her last known words.

At some point after that, for reasons that are still unclear, Emily went to Kevin's house. What happened next is detailed in the stark language of the police report. Around 6 a.m., Kevin phoned a friend of both his and Emily's, asking her to come over. She arrived to find Emily's bloodied body in the bathtub and called 911. Minutes after officers showed up, Kevin came outside and confessed; later, at police headquarters, he added more details.

He described getting into a physical argument with Emily. She was on the floor as he choked her and then grabbed a steak knife off his desk and stabbed her in the neck. For 15 minutes afterward, he just sat next to her. Then, "concerned about the blood," he removed Emily's pants and wrapped them around her neck before carrying her body and placing it on a shower curtain in the tub. Kevin volunteered to police that he had marijuana in his apartment and he'd quit taking the prescribed antidepressant Zoloft.

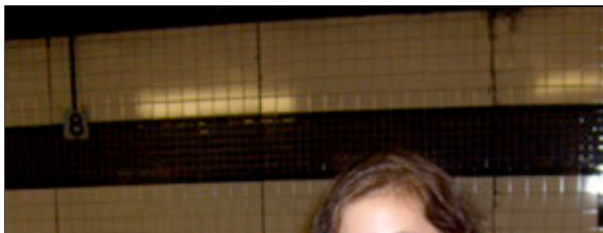
The trial is set for this month; he has pleaded not guilty to criminal homicide and other charges. If convicted, he will die in prison; Pennsylvania grants no parole for first-degree homicide. So like many men who kill a partner and then commit suicide, Kevin will have in effect destroyed his own life after taking Emily's.

At the pretrial proceedings, young friends wrestled with mourning Emily and, at the same time, the loss of Kevin. "Emily was a forgiving person," Antonia says. "What he did to her was very terrible. I'm trying my hardest as a good friend to Emily to forgive him. Emily would."

Remembering Emily

Her family has created [The EMILY Fund: Education, Mentorship, Inspiration, Leadership, and Youth for a Better World](#). It awards scholarships to young activists who apply by writing an essay about what they have done to help create a more peaceful and sustainable world.

"Emily's life shouldn't be defined by how it ended," insists Sally Quinn, Emily's sophomore roommate. "If she were here now, she'd deserve as much attention for who she is and what she stands for as she's getting for dying. The world lost out on someone who would have made a difference."



Signs a Guy Could Snap

Although breakup violence is hard to foresee, experts say there are certain traits and behaviors that indicate someone might be on the brink of physical abuse or even murder. Be very cautious if you start experiencing any of the following

signs of hidden hostility or emotional blackmail.

Possessiveness. He becomes increasingly jealous of your time and tries to control who you see, what you do, where you go, maybe even the clothes you wear.

Sudden personality shifts. He can transform swiftly from a gentle Dr. Jekyll type into a scary, angry Mr. Hyde persona.

Blaming. He makes it seem like you're wrong (and he's right) about everything and any of his problems that come up are your fault.

Demands. He doesn't take no for an answer, and you realize that his "requests" are actually "demands."

Threats. He uses coercive psychological tactics like tears, rage, badgering, and threatening to end the relationship.

Suicidal comments. A huge red flag — he may resort to this when it seems like nothing else is working. But if he's willing even to think about it or say it, he's getting dangerously desperate. What begins as suicidal could end as murderous.

How To Say Good-Bye Safely

If you or the people close to you have any gut feelings that your soon-to-be ex is capable of abuse, take these precautions.

- Before you end it, tell a friend, and if your ex has a key to your place, stay with someone you trust. Alert friends, family, and coworkers not to speak with him.
- Break up by phone or e-mail. It may seem unkind, but put your well-being first. There's no magic script to prevent violence — you could share the things you like about him, but give your reasons for leaving only once and keep things short.
- Change your routine. Stop going to places you frequented together. Make your profile on social-networking sites private, and change passwords.
- If he refuses to accept the breakup, seek professional help from a counselor, police, or the National Domestic Violence Hotline, 800-799- SAFE. If he makes actual threats, call 911 immediately.

Note: Plan ahead — safety planning work sheets along with info on warning signs and restraining orders are available at thesafespace.org.

<http://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/relationship-advice/emily-silverstein-murder>

PRINT ►

X CLOSE