

I met Hilary in high school. Back then, we were not big fans of one another. In 2012, Gina and Jessie signed up for a burlesque class where the only other two students were Hilary and another person I knew from high school. I couldn't believe it when I found out. Gina and Jessie really liked her, and we reconnected. We both admitted that we were not particularly proud of the people we'd been in high school, and set out to form a positive relationship.

Background

Hilary is unbelievably intuitive and empathic. Right from the start, Hilary told me she loved me, and described our relationship as much closer than seemed appropriate for how well we knew each other. As we grew closer, Hilary engaged in regular lovebombing. She would constantly tell me, Gina, and Jessie (and eventually Amber) how wonderful, smart, capable, and awe-inspiring we were, how much she loved us, and how happy we made her. I have reams of digital ink showing Hilary telling me that I make her feel happy, validated, and confident. She was always ready with a compliment whenever we talked, and always there to make us feel good about ourselves. As Hilary later put it, "I want to make people happy and please them. Partially because I love it, but also partially because (hey therapy) I believe that I earn continued love that way." It was intoxicating.

Because of how effusive she was with her praise, I failed to take serious note of a lot of red flags with her behavior. Most significantly, Hilary had a tendency to make things far more dramatic than I felt they needed to be. Routinely, things would happen to her which I, and I imagine most people, would just shrug off, but that would cause her extreme levels of stress, and which she would describe in hyperbolic terms. Not only that, but she would pump up the trauma level of people around her. If something unpleasant but bearable happened to me, Hilary would [catastrophize](#) it, encouraging me (and everyone else) to talk about it as if a tragedy had occurred, and whoever was responsible was the scum of the Earth. It didn't take me long to become uncomfortable with this tendency. I don't like to dwell on the negative things in my life, and Hilary would not let me move on if I told her about something. It wasn't long before I became uncomfortable telling her about anything negative in my life, and mostly avoided doing so unless I was prepared to have a lengthy conversation about it.

More Than Two has a good warning about this type of person (p. 409):

Our friend Edward Martin has compared people to the fuel rods and control rods in a nuclear reactor. The control rods are neutron absorbers; they absorb stray neutrons to prevent them from reaching other fuel rods. They are attenuators; they calm things down when things start to go wrong. The fuel rods, on the other hand, are where the runaway chain reactions take place. They're amplifiers: when things go wrong, the fuel rods escalate the problem. When choosing people to include in his life, Edward likes to look for attenuators rather than amplifiers. Faced with conflict, amplifiers escalate the situation - with demands, tantrums, ultimatums and sleep deprivation via all-night

processing sessions. Attenuators are flexible, with high emotional intelligence and good conflict-resolutions skills.

It was impossible to read this passage and not think of Hilary. However, because she was so loving and validating all the time with me, I thought I was special. Gina, Jessie and I all thought, even though we saw how she was with other people, that we would be different. And for two years, we were. She played the role of the perfect friend, providing support, love, and comfort, and accepting our support, love, and comfort in return.

Hilary once told me (in front of Gina and Jessie) that my approval was more important to her than anyone else's. I had no idea what to do with that. Looking back, I can now see it as a sign of dangerous levels of codependence. But at the time, I didn't think she could possibly be serious. She had two long-term partners, family, and longstanding friendships. Obviously I should have run at that point, but I had very little experience with codependency and knew almost nothing about it, so I wasn't aware of the weak boundaries and emotional dependency that typically come with such an admission.

There were other red flags. Hilary had a way of making most things about her. She would constantly bring up her own history of trauma in ways that centered the conversation around her, even when it was off-topic. She also had a lot of triggers and insecurities, such that attempting to navigate around them seemed like a full-time job. She talked about her social relationships, even those with people she just met, as if they were super close. When she told stories about her past, they were always light on details, but came out with her as the hero and anyone who made her feel bad a villain.

Hilary played the role of therapist with a large number of people. She would regularly receive calls from friends in crisis, and she would drop everything to attend to them. She would often disappear for 30-60 minutes at a time because someone was having an issue. After they hung up, she would complain about how she didn't like being everyone's therapist, and tell us all about the issue her friend had called about, giving out all sorts of private details. I was sort of shocked at the empathy she could display to someone's face and the callousness behind their back. But I continued to believe we were different.

Trauma was a huge theme with Hilary. In addition to playing therapist with her friends, Hilary would often play therapist with people she just met. I saw her, on several occasions, meet someone and have them confessing their most traumatic past experience literally within ten minutes. If anyone was talking about anything painful in her general area, she would find a way to insert herself into the conversation and draw out the story of trauma.

[This Thought Catalog article about narcissistic relationships](#) describes the concept of the idealization-devaluation-discard phases of a relationship with a narcissist. I don't know if Hilary is a narcissist, but I do know that the article hit close to home.

Phase I: Idealization

The idealization phase (which often happens most strongly during the early stages of dating or a relationship) consists of putting you on a pedestal, making you the center of his/her world, being in contact with you frequently, and showering you with flattery and praise. You are convinced that the narcissist can't live without you and that you've met your soulmate. Be wary of: constant texting, shallow flattery and wanting to be around you at all times.

- [Thought Catalog](#)

For two years, Hilary was one of my closest friends. She would routinely text or email me during the day. A search of my email shows over 300 conversations, and a search of my text archives shows almost 300 threads, many of which are hundreds of messages long, 80% of which were initiated by Hilary. I felt safe being vulnerable with her. Because of how validating she was, opening up to her was ridiculously easy. This is the type of conversation we would have regularly:

Hilary Nunes: So I owe you this like totally giant debt of gratitude because you've taught me all this stuff that makes me a more whole person. :) 7:29 AM
Me: Wut? What'd I do? 7:29 AM
Hilary Nunes: I've just learned a lot from you about how to value my own needs and voice them as important 7:32 AM
Hilary Nunes: And to treat myself as importantly as I treat other people and ask for what I want and need and I wasn't really good at that before we became close. 7:33 AM
Hilary Nunes: So: thank you. 7:33 AM
Me: [...] Ironically, I've learned a lot from you about how to respect other people's needs 7:44 AM
Hilary Nunes: :) 7:47 AM
Hilary Nunes: We have basically the most important and complimentary friendship in the history of ever. 7:48 AM
Me: Totes 7:55 AM

This is just offered as an example. My inbox is filled with similar exchanges, which would happen multiple times per week. One thing I confessed to her early on was my attraction to her. I figured she didn't feel the same way (and I was correct), but I thought it should be acknowledged nonetheless. Whenever it came up, I was always careful to tell her that other parts of our relationship were much more important to me, and she would always validate my emotions and lead me to believe that she was comfortable with the conversation. It wasn't something we talked about often, but neither was it a subject that we avoided, and she would occasionally bring it up herself when it was relevant to a conversation. She certainly never expressed any desire to avoid it as a conversation topic. Here is the last time I brought it up with her, from February 2014:

[This was after receiving an email where Hilary said that neither of her partners were in a place to experience physical intimacy, and that she was feeling “disconnected and selfish for wanting what I know just can't be available or enthusiastic right now”]

Me: Thanks for the update 12:07 PM

Me: I volunteer to be your sex surrogate :-)) 12:08 PM

Hilary Nunes: You're welcome. 12:08 PM

Hilary Nunes: That is hella selfless. 12:08 PM

Hilary Nunes: Altruistic, even. 12:08 PM

Hilary Nunes: I don't even know why it's such a big deal to me. 12:10 PM

Me: Which part? Sex? 12:10 PM

Hilary Nunes: Yeah. I get lots of other kinds of connection that are also meaningful. 12:11 PM

[...]

Me: I was only half joking about being a sexual surrogate. I'm still very attracted to you, and would love to help you meet that need, if you were interested. 12:18 PM

Hilary Nunes: Thank you for being honest. I don't return those specific feelings right now, but I love you very much. 12:19 PM

Hilary Nunes: If that changes, I promise I will talk to you about it. 12:20 PM

Me: Ok 12:20 PM

Me: I know you do! 12:21 PM

Hilary Nunes: I feel like a jerk for saying so. 12:21 PM

Me: Why? 12:23 PM

Hilary Nunes: But I know you prefer that I be very direct and I see the value in that, even when I feel uncomfortable. 12:23 PM

Hilary Nunes: Because I love you and want to make you happy. 12:23 PM

Hilary Nunes: And it feels like failing at that. 12:24 PM

Me: I just remember that you said when it comes to other forms of physical comfort, it doesn't really matter where it comes from 12:24 PM

Me: So I wanted to make sure that you knew I was available 12:24 PM

Hilary Nunes: That is still true. You are the best hugger who has ever lived period. 12:24 PM

Hilary Nunes: Real talk. 12:24 PM

Hilary Nunes: Thank you, Wes. I love you lots, and I'm lucky to have you. 12:25 PM

Me: I love you too! Our relationship makes me ridiculously happy. 12:26 PM

Hilary Nunes: I am so so glad. 12:26 PM

Hilary Nunes: And me too. 12:26 PM

Me: Also, it is reassuring to know that I CAN have a good relationship when there is a mismatch of sexual desire 12:27 PM

Me: Since that often goes badly 12:27 PM

Hilary Nunes: It is reassuring for me that I can be honest about that and not feel punished or loved less by you. 12:28 PM

Hilary Nunes: It makes me feel like what I do offer is pretty extraordinary. 12:28 PM

Me: Duh 12:29 PM

She even thanked me for my telling her, and made it clear that she felt loved and that what she offered had value. She once told me (in person) that I was the only person who had ever

expressed attraction, but made her feel that her friendship was enough. One time, I asked her how it felt when I stated my preferences, because I was worried that she was feeling pressured. She said that she sometimes felt obligated to give me what I wanted, but “that’s me [Hilary] stuff though, not you [Wes] stuff,” so I shouldn’t worry about it.

In 2013, Hilary and Gina tried dating for a little bit, and then Hilary broke up with Gina and lied to her about the reason. Some time later, Hilary admitted that she lied and asked Gina to get back together. Gina was having a hard time due to Shaun’s escalating abuse, but she agreed to give it another shot, and they dated for the first half of 2014.

When Hilary visited our house, which she did often, she cultivated an atmosphere in which sexuality and sensual touch were expressed freely. She would routinely walk around our house naked, often removing her clothes the minute she got in the door. Gina was never comfortable with Hilary’s nudity, but the one time Gina tried to express that to Hilary, Hilary laughed it off and explained that she just didn’t have a nudity taboo. Routinely, Hilary was the only one in any state of undress. When I commented to her that she was normalizing nudity for me, and that her naked body no longer excited me, she acted disappointed. She also solicited a large amount of physical touch. She told me that physical touch was her love language, and that being touched made her feel comfortable and safe, often no matter who was touching her. She would often put her hands on me, and she would initiate various kind of touches, often while undressed.

On one occasion during a burlesque rehearsal, Hilary swatted Jessie’s naked breast as she leaned over the kitchen table. Jessie yelped and withdrew. All of us were surprised at Hilary’s behavior, but nobody really knew how to react, so we moved on. I later found out that Jessie felt genuinely violated and uncomfortable about what Hilary had done because, as Jessie explained, they did not have the kind of relationship where they would touch each other that way.

After we kicked Shaun and Ginny out (in February 2014), Hilary was our biggest champion and cheerleader. She would routinely start conversations about how awful Shaun was or about how lousy Ginny’s enabling was. When Hilary saw the messages that Shaun was sending to us, she ripped into him, both privately to us and in emails to him. Hilary played the role of amplifier perfectly. Anything he did that could possibly be interpreted as wrong, according to Hilary, became beyond the bounds of all decency. She catastrophized every situation. Even I, who was not feeling charitable to Shaun in the slightest, thought some of her criticism was a little excessive. But I figured it was all out of love for us, and born from anger against the man who had caused us so much pain. I couldn’t really blame her, and I appreciated how hard she was fighting on our behalf. She helped us feel safe, and so I ignored her tendency to go completely scorched-Earth when she felt wronged (or when she felt that a loved one was wronged). I never thought we would never be on the other side of that.

In April of 2014, I sent Hilary an [article about queerplatonic relationships](#), which are nonsexual, nonromantic relationships that have an intense emotional connection. Not long before that I’d

started identifying as a relationship anarchist, and my relationship with Hilary was a big part of that. Hilary showed me that I could love someone just as strongly without a romantic or sexual connection. Hilary told me that she felt the same, and assured me that our lack of a sexual relationship didn't have to mean that we couldn't have just as important a relationship as she had with anyone else, even when it came to things like cohabitating, raising children, or other things that people traditionally only do with romantic/sexual partners. It was incredibly validating, and left me feeling confident that my relationship with Hilary was on solid ground and had a bright future.

Phase II: Devaluation

The devaluation phase is subsequent to this idealization phase, and this is when you're left wondering why you were so abruptly thrust off the pedestal. The narcissist will suddenly start to blow hot and cold, criticizing you, covertly and overtly putting you down, comparing you to others, stonewalling you, emotionally withdrawing from you and giving you the silent treatment when you've failed to meet their extreme "standards."

- [Thought Catalog](#)

That May, I started picking up on a longstanding pattern of Hilary's that I hadn't quite put together before, but that I couldn't ignore once I saw it. There was always something that seemed a little false about the way Hilary talked to me, but it took me almost two years to figure out what it was. It was that Hilary never really had an authentic conversation with me. The words she chose, her body language, her facial expression, and her inflection were all meticulously calculated to produce the intended emotional response. Usually, she tried to produce positive emotions, which is why being close to her could be inspiring and joyful. Hilary had been a crisis counselor for years, so she had extensive training in how to talk to people so as to avoid triggering any negative emotions and to inspire trust. I came to realize that she was using that training on me 24/7. She would never just say what she thought. Everything was about controlling my emotions.

Once I figured out what she was doing, I asked her about it. She admitted that yes, she tries to micromanage everyone's emotional responses. I asked her why? Her answer: "because I'm a control freak."¹ When I looked back on our relationship in light of knowing how emotionally manipulated I was the entire time, a lot of it seemed different, and it became difficult for me to trust her. I started suspecting that all of the lovebombing, validation, and praise weren't entirely sincere, and I also started worrying that she was avoiding saying important things because she knew they would be unpleasant to hear. I didn't like thinking of her as a manipulative person, but in light of what she'd admitted, it seemed undeniable.

¹ this was an in-person conversation, so its accuracy is less reliable than the other quotes given. However, I am very confident in this memory and this quote in particular, as it was something that caused me great concern at the time.

This was especially worrisome given my experience with Ginny (see [Part 3](#)), who had masqueraded for months as someone who approved of and enjoyed my emotional management style, my blunt communication, and my body, while inside rejecting all of them. Hilary had always been honest with me about how she felt about my body, though, so I assumed it couldn't be the same thing. I trusted that if I was doing something that bothered her, she would say so. However, that was also called into doubt.

In the same conversation in which Hilary admitted that she was constantly managing my (and Gina's and Jessie's) emotions, she also told me that she was frustrated with Gina because she felt that Gina talked about the emotional fallout of her abusive relationship with Shaun too much, and that she'd felt that way for weeks. Why on Earth she decided to tell me instead of Gina, I have no idea, but it was not information I was willing to keep to myself. I don't keep anyone's secrets unless I've been asked ahead of time and agreed, and I certainly don't keep things from Gina that I know she'd want to know. I knew how devastating it would be for Gina to hear that, in the past few weeks when Hilary had been empathizing with her and validating her emotions, she was secretly wishing that Gina would just shut up about it already. Gina's biggest fear is being a burden on people. I knew that hearing about Hilary's falseness would hit Gina right in one of her worst insecurities, and that every day it continued would be that much worse. I suggested that Hilary talk to Gina about it immediately. After a few days, Hilary still hadn't told Gina, and I felt that any more pretending that I didn't know what I knew would be dishonest and unfair to Gina. So I told Gina about what Hilary said, and I encouraged her to talk with Hilary about it ASAP. As I feared, it wrecked Gina's ability to trust and triggered her depression.

It also affected my ability to trust Hilary. One of the most important things to me in any close relationship is that I can trust the other person to tell me when something is bothering them. As I've detailed in the previous parts of this story, it's really important to me that I'm not crossing anyone's boundaries, but I can't know what those boundaries are if people don't communicate them or pretend they don't exist. I need to trust in their ability and willingness to set and enforce appropriate boundaries. When Hilary told me how she felt about Gina, I was horrified that Hilary wouldn't just state her boundary, and instead allowed Gina to unknowingly cross it over and over again for weeks, if not months. It horrified me not only because I knew the guilt would be overwhelming to Gina, but because I could no longer be confident that she would communicate to me if I accidentally overstepped one of her unstated boundaries. Hilary saw nothing wrong with what she was doing and [later described it this way](#):

if someone finds a delay in my report of some hurt or injury to be dishonest, my response is kind of like, "Well, you know. F*ck you. In the ear."

In June of 2014, Hilary had an emotional outburst at one of our burlesque rehearsals. She was over at our house to rehearse and plan for Jessie's birthday show, which was to be Jim Henson themed, and which we would be performing a week later. The background is that while they were monogamous, Hilary's boyfriend Tom cheated on Hilary with a monogamous girlfriend of a friend of ours that I'll call "Adam" (name changed). Adam is a good friend of Jessie's who

occasionally does musical performances. When Jessie was planning her birthday burlesque show, she thought it would be cool if Adam came and played “Jim Henson is Dead” for the audience during intermission. Jessie had brought it up with Hilary some time earlier, but Adam had not confirmed he was available until a week before the performance, at which point we informed Hilary. Hilary had about four glasses of wine that night, and she lost it. She demanded that we cancel Adam’s performance, or else she wouldn’t go on stage. She told us that she didn’t mind being there with Adam, but that Tom would be too uncomfortable and she would not perform without Tom in the audience. This was not a boundary that had been previously communicated to me. Gina and Jessie agreed to tell Adam that he could not perform. I was not happy about the decision, since I didn’t think that it was appropriate to cancel a performance that added a lot of value to our show just because Tom (a person we barely knew) didn’t like it, but I stayed out of the discussion and let Gina and Jessie handle it. They gave Hilary everything she asked for, with only the smallest and gentlest of resistance.

The following week, Gina broke up with Hilary. The reasons aren’t that important, but it had a lot to do with damaged trust and feeling like a second-class partner. Gina was hoping that if she and Hilary were no longer in a romantic relationship, they could focus on making their friendship work. Gina’s breakup communication stressed how important Hilary was to her, and how transitioning their relationship to a nonsexual place would allow Gina to better care for Hilary in the ways that she needed.

The tone of Hilary’s emails and texts changed immediately, and within hours she emailed Gina to say that she was angry not only with her, but with me and Jessie also, but with no indication of what any of us had done. It was similar to this situation in *Emotional Blackmail* (p. 94):

One minute I’m the most beautiful, exciting, interesting woman in the world, but as soon as I tell him I feel like I’m on a dead-end street and I have to get off so I can move on with my life, I’m a cold-hearted witch who doesn’t care about all the stress he’s under and how much he’s trying to work things out. Now he’s telling me that all he does is give give give, and all I do is take take take, which is a total 180 on what’s been happening.

She emailed the next day to say that she considered the trust between she and I “irrevocably broken” because I had told Gina about how Hilary secretly wished she would stop talking so much about Shaun. She accused me of “sabotage” and “meddling.” She also expressed big problems with Gina and Jessie, and hinted that she could no longer perform with our burlesque troupe because of how the situation with Adam was handled. Then she said she was turning her phone off because she was trying to enjoy her weekend and didn’t want to have to talk about this.

After seeing that email I was worried about her. I knew that she had not seen her therapist in several months, and the way she was dealing with this seemed really out of character and destructive. This was the email I sent her:

Hilary,

I'm extremely worried about you. I do not understand the magnitude of your reaction to any of this, and I fear that your anger and lashing out at all of us at the same is likely symptomatic of some ridiculous amount of stress that you are under, far more than I realized.

For my part, I am sorry that I didn't clearly communicate my policy on secret keeping. Namely, that I don't do it, except in rare circumstances where it had specifically been requested of me before any information had been revealed, and I have agreed to do so. I see all other expectations that I will keep secrets (aside from professionally), especially from my partners, to be unfair, presumptuous, and utterly unreasonable. This has been my policy for as long as we have been friends, and I thought you knew that. I deeply regret allowing you to reveal information to me that you considered confidential without letting you know that. In the future, I hope that you will not tell me anything that you wish to keep secret from people close to me without specifically warning me of that, and asking if I want to know anyway.

I feel as though you are interpreting my actions as an attempt to force a conversation between you and Gina, which, I assure you, it was not. It was merely a situation in which I had information that I knew Gina wanted. To fail to reveal it would have been dishonest. What she did with that information was not part of any plan of mine.

I love you, and I sincerely hope that we can discuss this in a reasonable manner soon. Above all, I am worried for your well-being and hope that you will get through this situation with as little pain and unhappiness as possible.

Hilary responded that yes, she had indeed been "under a great deal of stress and tiredness," and that I was likely correct. She mentioned a few other things which had been causing her stress, apologized for her "disproportionate response" and thanked me for my concern.

A Dead Cat Romance

We had a burlesque rehearsal that Monday (our performance was that Wednesday). It was awkward and tense. Halfway through, I got a message from Amber that Buddy, her cat, was dying. She was at the vet down the street from our house attempting to have him put down. Buddy was Amber's favorite living thing in the world and she'd spent the past few weeks doing everything she could to keep him alive so she could have a little more time with him. Apparently, the vet was completely incompetent, and told Amber that her cat was already dead when she brought him in. As soon as she left, Buddy woke up. So Amber drove to our house and sat outside in her car, scared that she would traumatize us with her zombie cat. Eventually, she told me that she was out there, and I ran out to see her. Hilary and Gina also came out and convinced her to come inside. We all sat in a circle petting Buddy for about 30min until it was over.

Gina and I had recently buried our cat Calamity Jane in our backyard, so we volunteered to give Buddy a spot next to her. Gina and I went out and dug a grave, and we buried Buddy. Amber,

Gina, and I shared a group hug. Amber, because she's a 12-year-old at heart, grabbed each of our butts and said something like "cat funeral ass grabs!" It added a welcome degree of levity to what was otherwise a really sad occasion, and let us know that Amber was ok and acting like herself. Afterward, it was late, and nobody was able to focus on burlesque, so we declared rehearsal a wash and everyone went home.

The next day, Hilary emailed Gina to express how "insensitive" she'd found our behavior the prior evening. Her first example of "insensitive" behavior consisted of the fact that we failed to hold a productive rehearsal and how dare we make her waste gas and toll money? Any reference to Amber's dead cat was conspicuously missing from Hilary's account. Her second example was that she was "witness to a tender, intimate, and flirtatious moment with Amber as though [she] was not standing there." Hilary had managed to take a story about Amber's grief over her favorite pet dying and make it all about her. Buddy wasn't even mentioned, nor was the fact that Amber was in tears at the time.

Phase III: Discard

Although "normal" relationships can end in a similar this manner as well, the difference is that the narcissist often makes it clear he or she intends to hurt you by giving you the silent treatment, spreading rumors about you, cheating on you, insulting you and disrespecting you during the discard phase. Unlike "normal" partners, they ensure that you never have closure, and if you decide to leave them, they might decide to stalk you to show that they still have control.

- [Thought Catalog](#)

Hilary's email included a whole lot of restrictive boundary-setting. First, she didn't want to have any conversations about emotionally heavy topics that did not involve her, and if there were any topics that did involve her, she wanted to be notified ahead of time and asked for permission to discuss them. On one hand, I was glad that Hilary was finally setting and communicating boundaries, but on the other, that didn't sound like a rewarding or engaging relationship. She also recommended that Gina just stop talking about the emotional fallout of her abusive relationship altogether, with anyone, as she felt it was "detrimental to the well-being of people who love you [Gina], not just me [Hilary]." I'm not sure who she was speaking of, as it was not detrimental to me, Jessie, or Amber, who were the only other people she discussed it with in any detail, and it had just happened two months before. The emailed was peppered with patronizing, unsolicited advice similar to that. Hilary also accused Gina of hypocrisy and projection because Gina was unhappy that Hilary expected all of us to provide emotional care to Tom, who again - we barely knew and had only met a couple of times, when that was something we'd never agreed to do. She then made a completely unnecessary and manipulative reference to a situation that with an ex-friend that, at time time, Gina had been processing as rape, drawing an analogy between Gina's sexual trauma and Tom's discomfort with Adam.

Overall, Hilary's email was disappointing. She, of course, had every right to draw whatever boundaries she liked, and I was happy that she was being proactive in doing so. But I was disappointed because it sounded like the relationship Hilary wanted was not one that I did. I am unhappy when certain topics are declared off-limits and people are expected to self-censor. It's not a dealbreaker for me, but it means that I can't feel all that close to somebody, so I mourned the loss of the closeness that we once had.

Hilary asked for a week or two of radio silence from Gina, but continued corresponding with me. She texted me to ask if she could email her thoughts, and I agreed that she could. She sent me a long email saying that she was worried that Gina (and the rest of us) saw some kind of pain hierarchy, where certain types of pain were entitled to care, and others (like Tom's) weren't. I disagreed with her and, in the gentlest terms possible, told her that I didn't think we were responsible to provide care to Tom because we barely knew him and had virtually no relationship with him regardless of how valid his pain was. Hilary responded by saying that she was cutting off all contact with me, Gina, and Jessie. All further contacts, she said, would be automatically filtered into their own folder, and she would likely not read them right away, if at all. I was about $\frac{3}{4}$ through an email to her at the time trying giving some further explanation about why we found her boundary-setting email upsetting. Ordinarily, I would have just trashed it, but she had left us instruction on how to get in touch, so I finished it up and sent it, adding a heading explaining that I understood she wouldn't be reading it right away, but that I hoped that, if she chose to read it, it would help her to understand how her words could be interpreted.

And that was it. My friendship with Hilary was over.

Hilary's Burlesque Photos

The previous summer, we had hired a professional photographer to take promotional photos for our burlesque troupe that we could use in our advertisements, on Facebook, and on our website. At one point, I designed a postcard that featured an image of Gina and Hilary. I am not a graphic designer, so designing the postcard was somewhat difficult. It was intended to be usable month after month. We used the postcard image on our website as well. We had a collection of our promo shots on the website, and on our Facebook page. Hilary happily participated in the photo shoot, and enthusiastically consented to having her image used in our promo shots.

I am also not a web designer, but I was the only one who had any knowledge regarding maintaining a website, so the job fell to me. Updating the website was a time and labor-intensive process (mostly because I didn't know what I was doing). Hilary maintained the Facebook page, and posted most of the photos herself. Hilary also posted our events on the ticketing website and listed her own email address and phone number.

At some point, Hilary removed her own access to the Facebook page without deleting her photos. In July, she contacted us requesting that her photos be removed. Jessie volunteered to

remove them, so I left it up to her. Hilary sent us a few emails, which I forwarded to Jessie. At that point, I thought the Facebook photos had been removed, and I planned on removing the postcard from the website as soon as we could get new promotional shots and a new postcard. In August, we hired our photographer again to take new promo shots. Around the same time, Hilary sent another email threatening legal action if we didn't take her photos down. Jessie was copied on her request, and said she would handle the Facebook photos. Shortly thereafter, the following exchange happened

Busts & Trunks Burlesque

Sent by Wesley Fenza

Aug 14, 2014 10:30am

I keep getting the same message from you (9 times so far) with something that says "This attachment may have been removed or the person who shared it may not have permission to share it with you"

Hilary

Aug 14, 2014 10:37am

That is because I'm reporting those images to [facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com) in an effort to have them taken down.

Hilary

Aug 14, 2014 10:37am

facebook advised me to keep that documentation. I have emailed you and wes about this, with a timeframe whereupon I expect my requests to be satisfied.

Hilary

Aug 14, 2014 10:38am

I did not want this whole thing to come to adversarial interaction, but at this point, I've tried asking.

Busts & Trunks Burlesque

Sent by Jessie

Aug 14, 2014 10:58am

Hilary, I have been doing the best I can. This is very emotionally and psychologically trying for me (as I know you feel it is for you), but every time I try to wipe things off the page there are still more that I somehow missed.

Busts & Trunks Burlesque

Sent by Wesley Fenza

Aug 14, 2014 11:06am

I didn't realize there were still photos of you on the page. I think I've gotten them all, but please confirm. Photos of you on the website will be removed at the next update. - Wes

Hilary

Aug 14, 2014 11:11am

Confirmed: Photos of my are all gone from the FB page. Thank you.

Hilary

Aug 14, 2014 11:11am

Do you have a date planned for the next update of the website.

Busts & Trunks Burlesque

Sent by Wesley Fenza

Aug 14, 2014 11:12am

We have received our new promotional shots, so we just need to design a new postcard. Should be within the next 2 weeks.

Hilary

Aug 14, 2014 11:13am

I suppose I will have to settle for that. Thank you for complying with my requests

Within the next two weeks, I didn't have the time and energy to do a full edit of the website and design a new postcard, so I just took down the whole site. It was around that time that we decided to stop performing, so the website wasn't critical any longer. We also removed all of Hilary's information from the ticketing website, despite the fact that she had full access to the site and could have taken down her information at any time.

That's the entire story. It's important to note that Hilary consented to her photos being used for promotional purposes, and they were used for only that purpose. She certainly had no legal right to have them taken down, and any threat of legal action was frivolous. However, we wished to honor her request in a way that wouldn't hinder our ability to market our shows. When Hilary was a member, our troupe required promotional shots, and organized a paid photo shoot to get them. When Hilary indicated that she wanted all photos of her removed, we couldn't do that right away without replacing them with substandard photos and putting in a lot of effort to overhaul the website and postcard. Jessie took down a number of her photos on the Facebook page, but missed a few, which I deleted as soon as I was notified. We made arrangements to have new photos taken, and scheduled the website to be updated shortly thereafter. If that wasn't fast enough for Hilary, that's unfortunate, but she has no right to demand that a nonprofit corporation perform unpaid labor on her preferred schedule.

Hilary's insistence on having things done on her timeline was especially galling, considering that she failed to return our things. Before the breakup, I had loaned Hilary my Xbox, and she was in possession of some of our burlesque accessories including a pair of dalmatian sunglasses of Jessie's that had a lot of sentimental value for her. Jessie asked for our things to be returned on July 3, the same day Hilary asked for her images to be taken down. It seemed pretty hypocritical

of Hilary to be indignant about the schedule at which our website was updated while she couldn't be bothered to drop our things in the mail.

Hilary emailed us on August 14 to say "you will find the things due to be returned to the Fenzorselli Household sometime tonight, on the porch." None of our possessions were ever returned.

Once I took down her pictures, I figured she had nothing else she wanted from us. I didn't expect to hear from her again. I did not anticipate that she would make up with Gina's abuser. But shortly after leaving our lives, she cozied back up with Shaun and Ginny, apologized for everything, and started amplifying their negativity. She quickly made friends with all of Ginny and Shaun's romantic network, and began planning attacks. No matter what Hilary's problem was with us, we never expected her to run back to Gina's abuser after what she'd witnessed. It was at that point we realized that we never truly mattered to her, and that as soon as we stopped giving her what she wanted, whatever happened to us wasn't important.

As [Thought Catalog puts it](#):

During the discard phase, the narcissist reveals the true self and you get a glimpse of the abuser that was lurking within all along. You bear witness to his or her cold, callous indifference as you are discarded. This is as close you will ever get to seeing the narcissist's true self.

The manipulative, conniving charm that existed in the beginning is no more — instead, it is replaced by the genuine contempt that the narcissist felt for you all along.

The discard phase continued the following February (see [Part 9](#)).

[Part 8: Ginny and Shaun Attack](#)