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Confessions of a Sociopath

She's a successful law professor and a Sunday school teacher, with a host of family and friends. But **her interpersonal calculus centers on how to manipulate and outmaneuver the many people in her life.** Welcome to a world of ruthless cost-benefit analysis, charm, and grandiosity.

By M.E. Thomas, published on May 07, 2013 - last reviewed on May 14, 2013



I have never killed anyone, but I have certainly wanted to. I may have a disorder, but I am not crazy. In a world filled with gloomy, mediocre nothings populating a go-nowhere rat race, people are attracted to my exceptionalism like moths to a flame. This is my story.

Once while visiting Washington, D.C., I used an escalator that was closed, and a Metro worker tried to shame me about it.

Him: "Didn't you see the yellow gate?"

Me: "Yellow gate?"

Him: "I just put the gate up, and you were supposed to walk around it!"

Me: [Silence. My face was blank.]

Him: "That's trespassing! It's wrong to trespass! The escalator is closed, you broke the law!"

Me: [I stare at him silently.]

Him: [Visibly rattled by my lack of reaction] "Well, next time, you don't trespass, okay?"

It was not okay. In explaining their horrible actions, people often say that they "just snapped." I know that feeling. I stood there for a moment, letting my rage reach that decision-making part of my brain, and I suddenly became filled with a sense of calm purpose. I blinked my eyes and set my jaw. I started

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Confessions of a Sociopath
She's successful and charming as well as ruthless and calculating.

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following him. Adrenaline started flowing; my mouth tasted metallic. I fought to keep my peripheral vision in focus, hyperaware of everything around me, trying to predict the movement of the crowd. I was hoping that he would walk into a deserted hallway where I would find him alone. I felt so sure of myself, so focused on this one thing I had to do. An image sprang to mind: my hands wrapped around his neck, my thumbs digging deep into his throat, his life slipping away under my unrelenting grasp. How right that would feel. But I know I had been caught in a megalomaniacal fantasy. And in the end it didn't matter; I lost sight of him.

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I Am a Sociopath

Remorse is alien to me. I have a penchant for deceit. I am generally free of entangling and irrational emotions. I am strategic and canny, intelligent and confident, but I also struggle to react appropriately to other people's confusing and emotion-driven social cues.

I was not a victim of [child abuse](#), and I am not a murderer or a criminal. I have never skulked behind prison walls; I prefer mine to be covered in ivy. I am an accomplished attorney and law professor, a well-respected young academic who regularly writes for law journals and advances legal theories. I donate 10 percent of my income to charity and teach Sunday school for the Mormon Church. I have a close circle of family and friends whom I love and who very much love me. Does this sound like you? Recent estimates say that one in every 25 people is a sociopath. But you're not a serial killer, never imprisoned? Most of us aren't. Only 20 percent of male and female prison inmates are sociopaths, although we are probably responsible for about half of all serious crimes committed. Nor are most sociopaths incarcerated. In fact, the silent majority of sociopaths live freely and anonymously, holding down jobs, getting married, having children. We are legion and diverse.

You would like me if you met me. I have the kind of smile that is common among television show characters and rare in real life, perfect in its sparkly teeth dimensions and ability to express pleasant invitation. I'm the sort of date you would love to take to your ex's wedding—fun, exciting, the perfect office escort. And I'm just the right amount of successful so that your [parents](#) would be thrilled if you brought me home.



Perhaps the most noticeable aspect of my confidence is the way I sustain eye contact. Some people have called it the "predator stare." Sociopaths are unfazed by uninterrupted eye contact. Our failure to look away politely is also perceived as being aggressive or seductive. It can throw people off balance, but often in an exciting way that imitates the unsettling feeling of

infatuation. Do you ever find yourself using charm and confidence to get people to do things for you that they otherwise wouldn't? Some might call it manipulation, but I like to think I'm using what God gave me.

I was a perceptive child, but I couldn't relate to people beyond amusing them, which was just another way for me to make them do what or behave how I wanted them to. I didn't like to be touched and I rejected affection. The only physical contact I sought usually entailed violence. The father of a friend in grade school had to pull me aside and sternly ask me to stop beating his daughter. She was a skinny, stringy thing with a goofy laugh, as if she were asking to be slapped. I didn't know that I was doing something bad. It didn't even occur to me that it would hurt her or that she might not like it.

A Chaotic Breeding Ground

I was the middle child in a family with a violent father and an indifferent, sometimes hysterical, mother. I loathed my father. He was phenomenally unreliable as a breadwinner, and we often came home to find the power shut off because we were months behind in our electricity bill. He spent thousands of dollars on expensive hobbies, while we were bringing oranges from our backyard to school for lunch. The first recurring dream I can remember was about killing him with my bare hands. There was something thrilling about the violence of it, smashing a door into his head repeatedly, smirking as he fell motionless to the floor.

I didn't mind arguing with him. I made it a point not to back down from our confrontations. Once in my early teens, we argued over the meaning of a movie we had watched. I told him, "You believe what you want," then left him. I slipped into the bathroom at the top of the stairs, shutting and locking the door. I knew he hated that phrase (my mother had used it before), and that my repetition of it presented the specter of another generation of women in his house who refused to respect or appreciate him, and instead despised him. I also knew that he hated locked doors. I knew these things would damage him, which is what I wanted.

"Open up! Open up!" He knocked a hole in the door, and I could see that his hand was bloody and swollen. I wasn't concerned about his hand, and I wasn't glad that he was hurt either, because I knew that it gave him satisfaction to be stricken by such passion that he could disregard his own pain and suffering. He kept working at the jagged hole until it was big enough for him to stick his face through; he was smiling so widely that his teeth showed.

My parents ignored my blatant and awkward attempts to manipulate, deceive, and inveigle others. They neglected to notice that I associated with childhood acquaintances without really forming connections, never seeing them as anything more than moving objects. I lied all the time. I also stole things, but more often I would just trick kids into giving them to me. I envisioned the people in my life as robots that turned off when I wasn't directly interacting with them. I snuck into people's homes and rearranged their belongings. I broke things, burned things, and bruised people.

I did the minimum necessary to insinuate myself into everyone's good graces so I could get what I needed: food when my family's pantry was empty, rides home or to activities if my parents were MIA, invitations to parties, and the one thing I craved most, the fear I instilled in others. I knew I was the one in power.

Aggression, risk taking, and a lack of concern for one's own health, or that of others, are hallmarks of sociopathy. When I was 8, I almost drowned in the ocean. My mother said that when the lifeguard fished me out of the water and breathed life into me, my first utterances were gasps of laughter. I learned that death could come at any moment, but I never developed a fear of it.

Before my 16th birthday, I got very sick. I usually kept these things to myself. I didn't like involving others in my personal issues, because it presented an invitation to others to interfere with my life. But that day, I told my mother about the sharp pain below my sternum. After she expressed her usual exasperation, she gave me herbal medicine and told me to rest. I went back to school even though I was sick. Every day my parents had a new remedy; I carried a little baggy of medicine with me—Tums, Advil, homeopathic cure-alls.

But I was still in pain. All the energy that I usually used to blend in and charm others was redirected to controlling the pain. I stopped nodding and smiling; instead I stared at them with dead eyes. I had no filter for my secret thoughts; I told friends how ugly they were and that they deserved the bad things that happened to them. Without the stamina to calibrate my effect on people, I embraced my meanness.

My abdominal pain migrated to my back. At one point, I spent the afternoon sleeping in my brother's car. Later, my dad looked at my torso and saw that something was wrong. Reluctantly, he said: "We'll go to the doctor tomorrow."

The next day, at the doctor's office, the physician spoke in outraged tones. My mother receded into quiet, semi-catatonic disavowal, the state she retreated to when my father punched things. The doctor questioned: *If you felt pain, what have you been doing for the last 10 days?* Then I passed out. When I came to, I heard shouting and my father convincing the doctor not to call the ambulance. I could sense their mistrust of him.

I could see wild panic in my dad's eyes. He and my mother let me suffer for over a week because, as I later discovered, our family's medical insurance had lapsed. When I woke up after surgery, I saw my dad standing over me with tired anger. My appendix had perforated, toxins spewed in my gut, I became septic with infection, and my back muscles became gangrenous. "You could have died; the doctors are very angry," my dad said, as if I should have apologized to everyone. I think my sociopathy was triggered largely because I never learned how to trust.

Why Trial Law Is a Sociopath's Fancy

My father's narcissism made him love me for my accomplishments because they reflected well on him, but it also made him hate me because I never bought into his self-image, which was all he cared about. I think I did a lot of the same things he did—played baseball, joined a band, attended law school—so that he would know that I was better.

I loved getting high marks in school; it meant I could get away with things other students couldn't. When I was young, what thrilled me was the risk of figuring out just how little I could study and still pull off the A. It was the same for being an attorney. During the California bar exam, people were crying from the stress. The convention center where the exam took place looked like a disaster relief center; people made desperate attempts to recall everything they had memorized over the prior eight weeks—weeks that I spent vacationing in Mexico. Despite being woefully ill-prepared by many standards, I was able to maintain calm and focus enough to maximize the knowledge I did have. I passed while others failed.

Regardless of my laziness and general lack of interest, I was actually a great lawyer when I was trying. At one point, I worked as a prosecutor in the misdemeanor department of the district attorney's office. My sociopathic traits make me a particularly excellent trial lawyer. I'm cool under pressure. I feel no guilt or compunction, which is handy in such a dirty business. Misdemeanor prosecutors almost always have to walk into a trial with cases they've never worked on before. All you can do is bluff and hope that you'll be able to scramble through it. The thing with sociopaths is that we are largely unaffected by fear. Besides, the nature of the crime is of no moral concern to me; I am interested only in winning the legal game.



When I was at one law firm, I was assigned to work for a senior associate named Jane. I was based in one of the firm's satellite offices, so I saw her once every few weeks. In law firms, you are supposed to treat your senior associate as if she is the ultimate authority, and Jane took this hierarchy seriously. You could tell that she never enjoyed such power in any other social sphere. Her pale skin mottled with age, poor diet, and middling hygiene was evidence of a lifetime spent outside the social elite. She wanted to wear her power well, but she was clumsy with it—heavy-handed in certain circumstances and a pushover in others. She was an entertaining blend of power and self-doubt.

I was not her best associate, and Jane believed that I was undeserving of all that I had accomplished. She put much effort into dressing appropriately, while I wore flip-flops and T-shirts at every semi-reasonable opportunity. While she billed as many hours as humanly possible, I exploited the nonexistent vacation policy by taking three-day weekends and weeks-long holidays.

One day we got into the elevator together. There were two tall, handsome men already inside. They both worked at the venture capital firm in the building. You could tell that they received multimillion dollar bonuses and likely arrived in one of the Maseratis regularly parked downstairs. The men were discussing the symphony that they had attended the night before—I also had attended it, though I didn't normally go to the symphony. I casually asked them about it.

They lit up. "So lucky to have met you! Perhaps you can settle a disagreement; my friend thinks that it was Rachmaninoff's second piano concerto that was performed last night, but I think it was his third." "It was his second." It hardly mattered what the right answer was.

The men thanked me and left the elevator, leaving Jane and me to travel to her office in enough silence for her to contemplate the dimensions of my intellectual and social superiority. She was jittery by the time we got to her office where we were supposed to talk about our work project. Instead, we talked about her life choices from the age of 18, her worries and insecurities about her job and her body, her attraction to women despite her being engaged to a man.

After that, I knew that whenever she saw me, her heart would flutter; she would worry about the secret vulnerabilities she had exposed to me, and she would wonder what it would be like to undress me or to slap me across the face. I know that for a long time I haunted her dreams. Power is its own reward, but with this particular dynamic established, I leveraged a brief cancer scare and outpatient procedure into a three-week paid vacation—another form of reward.

A Love Triangle of My Making

I like to imagine that I have "ruined people" or seduced someone to the point of being irreparably mine. I dated Cass for a while, but I ultimately lost interest. He, though, did not lose interest. So I tried to find other uses for him. One night he and I went to a party where we met Lucy. She was striking, particularly in her similarity to me, which made me want to ruin her. I did the calculations—Lucy is smitten with Cass, Cass is smitten with me, I had unexpected power over Lucy. At my direction, Cass began pursuing Lucy. I found out everything I could about Lucy from her well-meaning friends: Lucy and I were born hours apart on the same day; we had the same predilections, the same pet peeves, and the same style of distracted, quasi-formal communication. In my mind she was my alter ego.

For as long as Lucy dated Cass, I kept him as my sidepiece: I would induce him to make and then break dates with her in favor of being with me. He knew I was using him to mess with her. When he started to feel pangs of conscience, I broke it off with him. I waited until he focused all his attention on Lucy, waited until she got her hopes up, then I called him again. I told him we were meant for each other and I was just testing him.

Lucy made things worse for herself—she had no sense of keeping personal things private, particularly from people like me who could use the information against her. Meanwhile, her friends sometimes thought I was her. Things could not have gone more perfectly.

The thing that kept it interesting was my genuine fondness for Lucy. I almost wanted to be a true friend. Just thinking about this makes me salivate. But when she became a dessert too rich, I began to avoid her. I made Cass break it off with her for good.

What did I actually do to Lucy? Nothing. She grabbed a boy and kissed him. She liked this boy. She saw him a couple of times a week, sometimes with his creepy friend—me. After a while, it didn't work out. The end. I didn't ruin anything about her. She's married now and has a good job. The worst thing I did was propagate a romance that she believed was sincere, one that I staged (as best as I could) to break her heart. I know my heart is blacker and colder than most people's; maybe that's why it's tempting to break theirs.



What Is Evil, Really?

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a sociopath's dream. Mormons believe that everyone has the potential to be godlike—I believe this includes me. Every being is capable of salvation; my actions are what matters, not my ruthless thoughts, not my nefarious motivations. Everyone is a sinner, and I never felt that I was outside this norm.

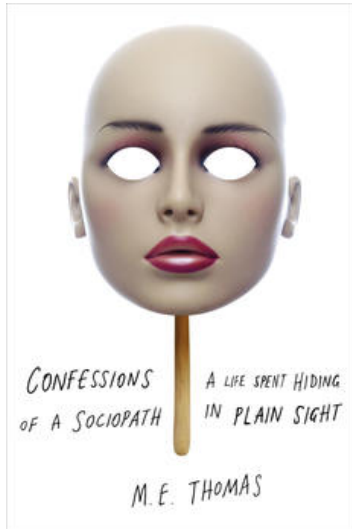
When I attended Brigham Young—where students were even more trusting than the average Mormon—there were myriad opportunities for scamming. I stole from the lost and found, saying I lost a book, but then I would take the "found" book to the bookstore and sell it. Or, I'd take an unlocked bike that sat in the same place for days. Finders, keepers.

But I am functionally a good person—I bought a house for my closest friend, I gave my brother \$10,000, and I am considered a helpful professor. I love my family and friends. Yet I am not motivated or constrained by the same things that most good people are.

I don't mean to give the impression that you shouldn't worry about sociopaths. Just because I'm high-functioning and nonviolent doesn't mean there aren't a lot of stupid, uninhibited, or dangerous sociopaths out there. I myself try to escape people like that; after all, it's not like all sociopaths give each other hall passes to avoid harassment.





Despite having imagined it many times, I've never slit anyone's throat. I wonder, though, had I been raised in a more abusive home, whether I would have blood on my hands. People who commit heinous crimes—sociopath or empath—are not more damaged than everyone else, but they seem to have less to lose. It's easy to imagine a 16-year-old version of myself being handcuffed in an orange jumpsuit. If I had no one to love or nothing to achieve, perhaps. It's hard to say.


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