

Getting It Through My Thick Skull

Why I Stayed,
What I Learned,
and What Millions
of People Involved
with Sociopaths
Need to Know



MARY JO BUTTAFUOCO
with Julie McCarron

Sampler

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INTRODUCTION

Joey Buttafuoco is a sociopath. There, I said it. Sad but true. The man who stole my heart in high school—whose large, hardworking Italian family embraced me, who constantly professed undying love and devotion, with whom I shared a million happy, fun times—is a sociopath. I loved my husband with all my heart, raised two great children with him, and fully expected that we would grow old together in our beautiful waterfront home on Long Island, surrounded by family and close friends. I stood steadfast next to this man, ferociously defending him for years after the infamous shooting by Amy Fisher turned our last name into a worldwide punch line. This same man is also the walking, talking dictionary definition of a clinical sociopath. This was a recent, life-changing realization for me—and goes a long way toward answering the one question that seems to fascinate the public more than any other: *Why did she stay for so long?* It's clear to me now: I was in thrall for almost thirty years to a sociopath.

Ironically enough, it was our son, Paul, who brought this inescapable truth to my attention. Two years ago, on Father's Day 2007, my son and I were discussing Joey's latest

embarrassing stunt—a highly publicized, entirely fake “reunion” between him and Amy Fisher, in which they held hands, kissed for the cameras, and claimed they were “getting back together.” Joey and I were no longer married, but his actions continued to affect us all. I could only shake my head and wonder, as I had countless times over the years, *When is he going to grow up? Why is he making such a fool of himself? When will he ever get it?*

“Never,” Paul said flatly. “He’s never going to get it. He’s a sociopath.”

My first reaction was denial. “Sociopath” is a scary-sounding word. I thought a sociopath was a crazy person, a nut job, someone who couldn’t function in society, or a charming but cold-blooded killer. The word has been used so often to casually describe extreme cases—like O. J. Simpson, Scott Peterson, and Ted Bundy—that the true nature and scope of its meaning eluded me. But Paul’s calm certainty and the discussion that followed nagged at me long after we moved on to other topics. The word reverberated in the back of my mind for the rest of the day. Late that night, when all our company had gone home, I went to my computer and Googled the words “sociopath traits.” In less than a second, up popped a huge list of articles. I clicked on the very first link: “The Sociopathic Style: A Checklist,” developed by Dr. Robert Hare, coauthor of *Snakes in Suits*, and read this list of traits:

- ✓ Glibness and superficial charm
- ✓ Grandiose self-worth
- ✓ Need for stimulation/prone to boredom
- ✓ Pathological lying
- ✓ Conning and manipulative
- ✓ Lack of remorse or guilt
- ✓ Shallow affect
- ✓ Callousness and lack of empathy
- ✓ Parasitic lifestyle
- ✓ Poor behavioral controls
- ✓ Promiscuous sexual behavior
- ✓ Early behavioral problems
- ✓ Lack of realistic, long-term goals
- ✓ Impulsivity
- ✓ Irresponsibility
- ✓ Failure to accept responsibility for actions
- ✓ Many short-term marital relationships
- ✓ Juvenile delinquency
- ✓ Revocation of condition release
- ✓ Criminal versatility

There he was: Joey Buttafuoco described to a T. And just like that, the lights went on. This information was the missing piece to an infuriating puzzle I'd been trying to solve for decades: What was wrong with Joey? Why couldn't I fix it? Why was our marriage in such constant turmoil? Why was I continually off-balance and bewildered? Suddenly, I saw my

whole life through an entirely new prism. This knowledge was one of the most earthshaking revelations of my life—and, believe me, I've had quite a few surprises along the way.

My son's disclosure started me down a new and fascinating path. Since that night, I've done a great deal of reading, conducted lots of research, and talked to several experts on the subject. This type of personality disorder can manifest itself in a number of ways. Many sociopaths wreak so much havoc that their true underlying condition remains hidden for a very long time, if not a lifetime. Of course, people have affairs and cheat on their spouses every day. Lots of men and women struggle with drug or alcohol addiction. All kinds of adults are irresponsible, or liars, or manipulative, or charming enough to talk their way out of anything. None of these characteristics on their own mean anything other than what's there on the surface for all to see.

But twenty-two years of all of these behaviors in tandem established a pretty convincing pattern. There were plenty of warning signs along the way, if only I'd known what I was looking for. Living with a sociopath disrupts every part of normal life—sex, money, parenting, employment—and I scrambled around for twenty years trying to patch up all of those areas, never once realizing that there was a bigger problem. “Why can't you get it through that thick Irish skull of yours?” was my mother's constant refrain when I was defiant teenager. She bemoaned my thick Irish skull so often that it became a running family joke. My grandfather used to commiserate with

my mother when she was at the end of her rope with me: “What’s the sense of being Irish if you can’t be thick?”

After years of grief and worry, not to mention a bullet to the head, I finally did get it through my thick skull. I’m quite clear about what was really going on with my ex-husband and former marriage. But I might have been saved all those years of doubting myself and hoping against all hope that things would change if I’d just been in possession of the knowledge and information I have now!

This knowledge was so life-changing for me that I decided to write this book to try to help educate others about sociopathic behavior, using my own painful past as a prime illustration of a long marriage to one specific type. The list of sociopathic traits given above is an accurate description of what I lived with for years, and through my recounting of the Amy Fisher circus, plus other, more private moments between Joey and me, I will show you just how insidiously they were put into practice and how well they can be masked—especially when there’s a willing victim. This is a key element in the life of any sociopath: a willing partner. Whether that partnership is a long-term relationship or only the passing illusion of partnership projected by the sociopath to further his or her goals, a sociopath is never completely alone. Like the first part of the word (socio, from the Latin *socius*, or companion) says, the sociopath only comes to power out in society, and their greatest skill in life, beyond any other talent they may have, is the skill to manipulate. For much of my life, I possessed neither the

insight nor the strength to break that spell.

Apparently, I'm far from alone. I was amazed to learn just how widespread this condition is. Just as there was very little public awareness about autism thirty years ago, or understanding of what attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) meant twenty years ago, the general public doesn't realize how common this untreatable condition really is. Millions of women and men find themselves stuck in relationships they can't fix; heartbroken parents struggle with adult children who suck them dry emotionally and financially; long-suffering friends and coworkers are continually exploited by those who put them into no-win situations and abuse their kindness. I want everyone to understand what sociopathic behavior is and to bring it to the forefront of America's conscience.

In doing the research for this book, I have had to go back, dig deep, and relive many episodes of my life that, quite honestly, I would much prefer to bury forever. As the months passed and I worked on this project—recalling many painful and humiliating incidents, some buried so deeply that only old headlines jolted them back into my consciousness—my family and friends grew concerned. “Why now?” they asked. “Why rehash all of this seventeen years later?” The answer is simple: by sharing my story, I hope that my experiences will save others from similar heartache. I wouldn't wish marriage or an intimate relationship to a sociopath of any kind onto anyone; my hope is that this book will inspire others to “get it” and get out far sooner than I did. I promise, there is a great new life on the other side!

APRIL SHOWERS BRING MAY PROWLERS

A bright, white light shone directly on my face, hurting my eyes as I opened them and struggled to focus. I could barely see; the light was blinding. Suddenly, a female figure dressed all in white appeared over me. She put her face near mine and immediately started calling my name: “Mary Jo, Mary Jo!”

Who is this, and how does she know my name? I wondered groggily.

“You are at the Nassau County Medical Center, Mary Jo. You’ve been shot. But you’re going to be okay. You’re in the hospital; we’re taking good care of you,” the woman said, enunciating very loudly and clearly.

Shot? I’d been *shot*? How very strange. I pondered this for a couple of seconds, and then the lights went out again.

I awoke sometime later gasping for air, panicking because I couldn’t breathe and didn’t know why. I vaguely recalled being told I’d gotten shot, though it seemed like a dream. I cast my

mind back to the last thing I remembered: the girl I'd just seen. That girl who'd been at my house, some teenager, just a kid.

"Mary Jo! Mary Jo! Do you know who did this to you?" the nurse asked. I nodded my head "yes." It was that girl. I tried desperately to speak, but I couldn't breathe, I couldn't talk; it felt like a hundred-pound weight lay squarely on my chest, sucking all the air out of me. *I can't breathe, I can't breathe!* I made a motion of scribbling in the air, and a yellow legal pad and pen were produced and put into my hands.

I'm suffocating, I wrote. The word trailed off at the end, all over the paper, but the nurse was elated. Not only was I going to live, but clearly I wasn't paralyzed—I was still able to write. And I couldn't have much brain damage, since I'd spelled suffocating correctly. The machine that had been steadily breathing for me for the past few days was too slow now that I had awakened with anxiety flooding my system. The nurse took the breathing apparatus out of me and off of my chest. The relief was immediate; I could breathe again. I wrote, *Was I shot?*

"Yes," the nurse replied simply.

"Why?" I wrote. She had no answer. I drifted off again, waking to see my husband, Joey, at my bedside examining the words on the pad. He handed it to me.

"Mary Jo, do you know who did this to you?" he asked.

"Nineteen-year-old girl," I scribbled.

A girl? The police had been operating on the assumption that I had been attacked by a man in my backyard. This really threw Joey and the nurse. In fact, now they worried that I really

did have brain damage, because what kind of girl would do this?

“Anne Marie,” I wrote down. “T-shirt.” Little flashes were coming back to me. “She said she . . .” I was trying to explain to them what she told me—that her little sister was having an affair with Joey. But the effort exhausted me, and out I went again.

When I woke up again, my whole head was pounding, and there was a maddening ringing in my ears. I raised my hand to gingerly examine where the excruciating pain was centered, on the right side of my head, just in front of my ear. My fingers traced over a thick bandage, but I couldn’t feel anything as I carefully examined my head. The entire right side of my head was completely numb, as if it had been shot full of Novocain. It felt like my face was hanging off of my skull. A couple of inches behind the bandage, I felt my hair—or what was left of it. The tracheotomy tube had been removed, and I could finally speak. My voice emerged for the first time in days.

“What happened to my hair?” I croaked. The right side of my head had been completely shaved for surgery; I had been given a radical buzz cut. Two uniformed police officers were in the room, along with Joe, his brother Bobby, and my parents. They all raced to my bedside, and even in my condition I was alarmed at how tired and haggard their familiar faces were. It hit me then. This is really bad. What a commotion I’ve caused! I tried my best to reassure my family that I was all right by making light of the situation, like I always did. I grabbed my

mother's hand. "You see, Ma? This thick skull really came in handy!"

"Do you remember what happened? Who did this to you?" That was all they wanted to know. Amazingly enough, I remembered everything.



I was outside on our backyard deck, painting the built-in wooden bench white to match my wicker furniture, which I'd recently removed from the garage, shaken off, hosed down, and covered in bright flowered cushions. It was a sunny morning in May, my favorite time of year. Prior to that, we muddled through the snow, ice, and endless gray days, knowing that with each passing day of gloom, spring and summer would be one day closer.

I felt lucky and grateful to be a stay-at-home mother in the most wonderful community I could imagine. Paul was in sixth grade, and Jessica was in third. My days were full with homework, after-school activities, volunteering at their grammar school, and serving on the board of the Biltmore Shores Beach Club. There was a constant round of birthday parties, bar and bat mitzvahs, holidays, communions, confirmations, and christenings throughout the year, but the social calendar really kicked in to high gear in the summertime—living as we did just a stone's throw from the water.

It was truly my dream house, and I lavished it with care and attention. Nothing too big or fancy, but perfect for our family of

four. The front door opened into a small foyer, with stairs leading up to the second-floor bedrooms. To the left was the living room, which was light and airy. I had decorated in blues and whites. The walls were painted and wallpapered in pastels, and I had hand-stenciled the doorways. Large area rugs were scattered on top of light hardwood floors. Dried flowers and framed family pictures softened the room. The house was warm and cozy—a real home; it was a place I envisioned growing old in and someday having our grandkids visit. My fifteenth wedding anniversary was just around the corner. The plane tickets for our getaway celebration to Jamaica were upstairs on my dresser. I had a long list of projects I wanted to accomplish before we left.

I left the front door to the house wide open to let the fresh air circulate through the house while I painted. This also made it easy to see which friend was dropping by today. Massapequa was a small, close-knit community. I'd gone to high school and even grade school with many of my neighbors. We routinely ran over to one another's houses to borrow ingredients, have a quick cup of coffee, or plan upcoming club events.

I had only been working for about twenty minutes when I heard the doorbell chime. I shaded my eyes and looked through the glass French double doors that led from the dining room to the deck. A young girl was standing at the front door. I set the paintbrush on top of the open paint can and walked through the house, removing my painting gloves one finger at a time. "What can I do for you?" I asked when I reached the front door.

“Are you Mrs. Buttafuoco?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” the girl asked.

“Sure, no problem,” I replied, as I opened the screen door and walked out onto the stoop.

The reassuring sounds of suburbia surrounded us: a car going down the street, lawnmowers and leaf blowers whining as neighbors tidied their lawns for summer. Noise from hammers and drills, along with faint laughter and teasing voices, drifted over from the beach club as my neighbors made repairs before the club officially opened for the season in four days.

I glanced at the unfamiliar car parked across the street and saw a young man sprawled in the driver’s seat. My first thought was that these were teenagers looking for an estimate on a car repair. Over the years, people occasionally stopped by the house to ask my husband, Joey, an auto body specialist, to do a preliminary assessment. He and his brother Bobby worked in the family business his father, Cass, had founded: Complete Auto Body and Fender, Inc., located just a few miles away in the neighboring town of Baldwin. I stood outside now, gloves in hand.

“I need to talk to you about your husband, Joey,” the girl began. I leaned against the wooden railing on the right side of the front stoop. The girl faced me, leaning against the left side. There were about five feet between us. She took a deep breath. “I came here to tell you that Joey is having an affair with my little sister,” she blurted out. This kid standing in front of me

appeared to be about fourteen years old. My first reaction to this was simple disbelief. I didn't feel upset or threatened. I just looked at her skeptically. "Your little sister?! How old are you?"

"I'm nineteen." She started to get nervous.

"And how old is your little sister?"

"She's sixteen . . . didn't you hear what I just told you?"

"I heard you, but I'm having a little trouble believing you. What's your name?" She hesitated.

"Anne Marie."

"And where do you live, Anne Marie?"

"In Bar Harbor . . ." the girl pointed directly behind me.

I had lived in the area all my life. I knew where Bar Harbor was, and she had pointed in the wrong direction. Something was wrong here, but I couldn't figure out what she was doing. Why was she so nervous? What was she lying about?

"Aren't you upset by what I'm telling you?"

"What are you so nervous about, Anne Marie?" I asked. Apparently, I wasn't reacting the way she'd expected. To be completely honest, though I acted nonchalantly, I was a little caught off guard by what she said, but I knew she was lying about something. I had a twelve-year-old son and a nine-year-old daughter, and this encounter reminded me of the times I had caught them both in lies. This is exactly what I was dealing with now. Only this wasn't my kid.

The whole incident was starting to annoy me. I was busy. I had painting to do, and I wasn't sure where this conversation was going, but I was tired of it already. She was becoming quite

indignant; she could see that she wasn't getting through to me.

"Don't you think it's disgusting that a forty-year-old man is having sex with a sixteen-year-old?"

What could I say to that?

"Well, sure, but don't make him forty yet; he's only thirty-six." I was half-smiling because I was being nice to her, trying to humor her. "I'm also having a hard time believing what you're telling me," I said. I pointed to the car across the street. "Who's that?" I asked.

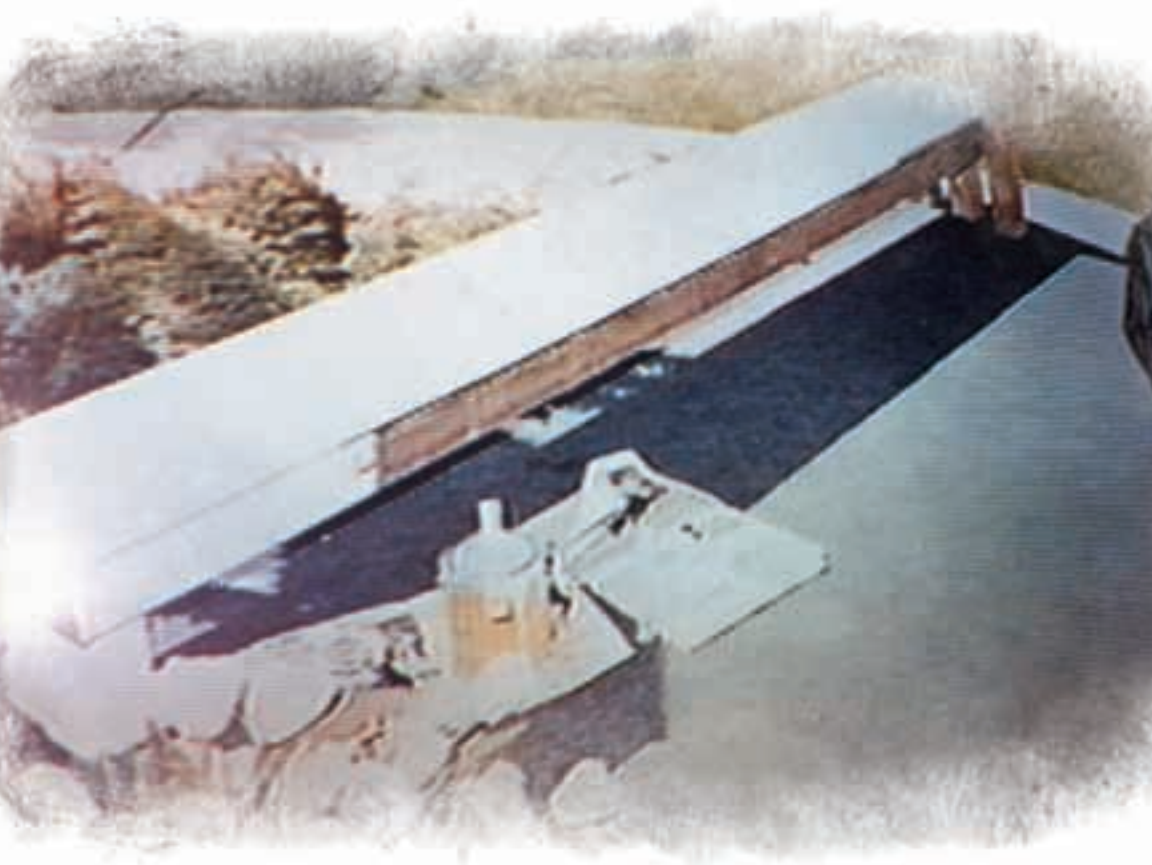
"That's my boyfriend. I have proof!" she said abruptly. Suddenly, she thrust a Complete Auto Body shirt at me. I took it from her and examined it. It was one of the new white polo-style golf shirts with the company name and logo of a race car with checkers stitched on the left breast. Joey had just brought a stack of them home a few days before. "I found this in my little sister's bed when I was making it! He came over during work and had sex with her and left his shirt!"

It was definitely time to end this meeting. It had lasted no longer than two minutes, but this kid was sounding more and more like an idiot. "He left this in the bed and went back to work with no shirt on?" She didn't have an answer for that one. "Look, Anne Marie, I don't know what you want me to do about this, but I'll go inside and call Joey and tell him you came by." I was calm. Possibly a little annoyed, but my annoyance was directed more toward my husband at that moment. Joey was a big overgrown kid, my number one child. Long experience had taught me that whenever there was trouble, Joey was

usually the culprit. What misunderstanding had he gotten mixed up in now? This Anne Marie was so obviously lying to me, but why? And for what?

And then, because my parents raised me to be polite, I said briskly, “Thanks for coming by.” I turned to my right, and got my thumb caught on the handle of the screen door. That split second would be the end of my life as an anonymous housewife in suburban Long Island. An explosion went off on the right side of my head—and everything went black.





Around noon on Tuesday, May 19, 1992. This is the bench I was painting when I was interrupted by the doorbell ringing.



These are the gloves I was wearing and holding in my hand when Amy shot me. The dark spots are blood.



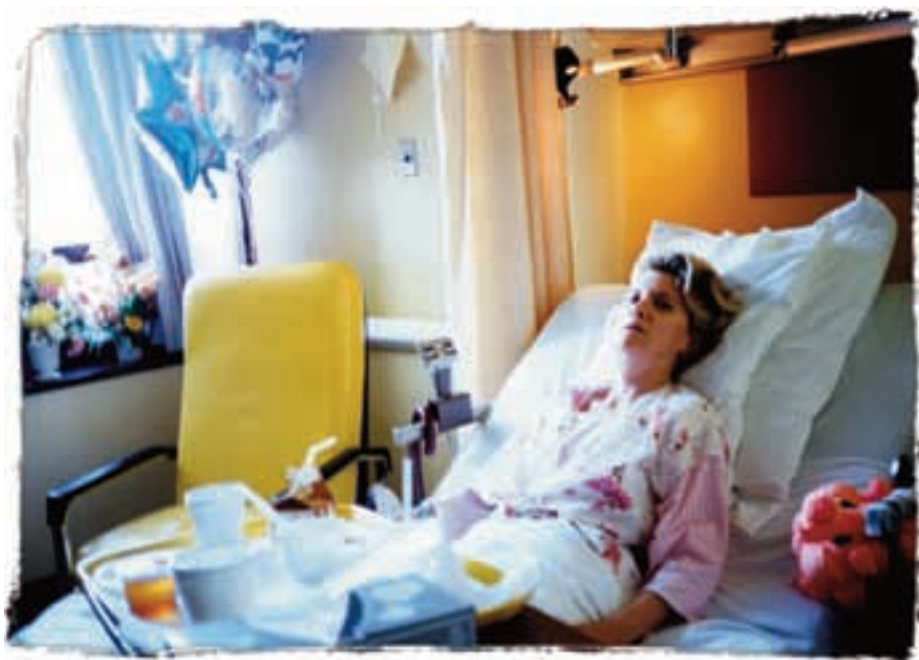
The jacket I was wearing.



*What's left of the T-shirt I had on -
paramedics had to cut it off of me.*



In the hospital—the bullet hole had to be cleaned out and packed four times a day. It was agony.



Surrounded by flowers, balloons, and Jessica's favorite stuffed animal pig, I still couldn't believe what was happening.



A view from my bedroom window. The media was a constant, intrusive presence in our once quiet neighborhood.



The Board at the Biltmore Beach Club voted to put a gate in our backyard so we didn't have to go out the front door. The beach club and our friends and family were the only respite we had that summer of 1992.

“Mary Jo’s book is a compelling real-life story of healing and hope. She teaches us that leaving a sociopathic spouse, learning to live again, and even forgiving are possible.”

—Dr. Martha Stout, bestselling author, *The Sociopath Next Door*



“ I THINK, EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE, *about the life I should be living, the one I fully expected to be enjoying right about now. In the life I was supposed to have, my husband and I would be admiring the view from our waterfront home in the town where we were both born and raised. Good friends and neighbors would be next door, up the street, and all over the neighborhood. Our parents would live only blocks away, in our childhood homes. We’d be taking our grandchildren to the beach club on weekends, enjoying the fruits of our labors, and looking forward to a peaceful retirement. That was the plan, anyway . . . but the whole world knows how that turned out.* ”

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