



Could a Man Drive You Crazy?

By Sarah Bird



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If a smart, high-achieving, disciplined woman like astronaut Lisa Marie Nowak could be turned into a diaper-wearing, BB-gun-toting crazy person by a guy who ditched her for another woman, you have to wonder: Could a man drive you crazy? That crazy? Sarah Bird gets some answers from a neuropsychiatrist, an evolutionary psychologist, and a woman private eye who's (almost) been there herself.

When NASA astronaut Lisa Marie Nowak, 43, recently separated mother of twin 5-year-old girls and a teenage son, scorned lover of navy commander William Oefelein, 41, put on the MAG (maximum absorbency garment) to avoid pit stops during her nearly 1,000-mile drive to confront Billy O's new girlfriend, Colleen Shipman, she headed for a destination she'd never intended. Carrying a BB gun, a four-inch Buck knife, pepper spray, a steel mallet, trash bags, several feet of rubber tubing, a trenchcoat, a wig, and a computer disc containing images of a woman in bondage poses, she made it as planned, from Houston to Orlando—but once there, she ceased to be an international icon of female achievement. Instead, Nowak followed in the footsteps of Jean Harris (headmistress of an elite private boarding school who shot her cheating lover, the Scarsdale diet doctor, Herman Tarnower) and Clara Harris (the Houston dentist who ran over her adulterous husband several times) as the latest lovesick woman

who had it all and snapped.

If Lisa Nowak, who has risen both figuratively and literally about as high as any woman is able to rise, can lose it, is every woman discarded by her lover in danger of skidding out of control? The diaper in particular—an almost too-perfect symbol of the helpless, infantile state to which love gone wrong can reduce us—has prompted many women to ask themselves some version of: "I may have done some slightly nutty stuff. I may have snipped him out of all the wedding photos, I may have called his boss to say he was a two-timing lowlife, even keyed the other woman's car. But I never put on the diaper. I could never be that crazy. Or could I?"

Lisa Nowak's ruin reads like a hollywood screenplay. The co-aledictorian of her high school class, she graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy, received a master's degree in aeronautical engineering, completed test-pilot school, flew aboard the shuttle *Discovery*, and became one of a handful of women to balance raising a family with space travel. Then, about three years ago, she began an affair with fellow astronaut Oefelein, according to his police statement. At the time, she was living with her husband of 16 years, Richard, and their three young children. When Oefelein announced in January 2007 that he was in love with Colleen Shipman, Nowak "seemed a little disappointed but...accepting" of the new situation, he told detectives; she was still one of his "best friends at NASA." It's clear, though, that Nowak did not see their relationship in such a palsy-walsy light. In a letter to the commander's mother, Billye Oefelein, thanking her for being "another mom to turn to," Nowak told her that she was finally ending her marriage to Richard: "...I am in the process of completing all the official divorce paperwork," she wrote. Calling Oefelein "absolutely the best person I've ever known," Nowak confessed to his mother that she loved him "more than I knew possible."

Reality must have hit, however, when Nowak read a few e-mails between Oefelein and his new paramour, possibly after letting herself into his apartment with the key he'd given her. While Oefelein was in orbit last December, Shipman had written, "Will have to control myself when I see you. First urge will be to rip your clothes off, throw you on the ground, and love the hell out of you." A few weeks later, after the cancellation of a simulated flight, she wrote, "All this excitement and no launch. You'd better watch out when I see you again!!!! GRRRRRR!!!!" She wasn't the only interested party. "I need to see you. I am having Colleen withdrawals. Must see Colleen," he e-mailed at one point; at another, "You must really

have me around your finger that I can't even function without you here..."

One might assume that someone controlled and collected enough to handle potential disasters in outer space would take such information in stride. To which Louann Brizendine, MD, director of the Women's Mood and Hormone Clinic at the University of California, San Francisco, and author of *The Female Brain*, replies with a hearty "Not so fast." The pioneering neuropsychiatrist explains, "Every person who falls in love becomes crazily obsessed with their love object. Your brain is flooded with dopamine, oxytocin, estrogen, and testosterone. The amygdala and the anterior cingulate cortex—your worry and caution centers—get turned way down. It's a lot like being on Ecstasy." Strangely enough, she goes on to say, "the state of early romantic love can be reignited by being dumped, which actually heightens the phenomenon of passionate love in the brain circuits." So when a man breaks up with a woman, that can send her into an agitated, attentive state, where she becomes obsessed with getting him back.

"Now, most jilted women can't eat, they can't sleep, can't work, can't concentrate," Brizendine says. "They cry all the time and may think about suicide. But Lisa wasn't just any jilted woman, right? All her training said, 'Fix the problem. Act.'" True, Nowak wasn't used to taking no for an answer. The *Catholic Standard* reported that while speaking to schoolchildren about how she'd applied to test-pilot school six times and beat out thousands of applicants to become an astronaut, she said, "If something looks like 'I can't do this,' it doesn't mean it's the end of the road." She advised the children to treat obstacles as opportunities.

"Nine hundred miles in a diaper," says Brizendine, "ain't nothin' compared to all the other obstacles she'd overcome in her life."

If brain chemistry wasn't on Nowak's side, neither were hundreds of thousands of years of evolution. "Jealousy is a universal emotion," says David M. Buss, PhD, a world-renowned expert on the evolutionary psychology of human mating. In addition to writing the first textbook on the subject, Buss is the author of *The Dangerous Passion: Why Jealousy Is as Necessary as Love and Sex*, which explains how hardwired this most volatile of emotions is. In the name of reproductive success, we've inherited a fierce instinct to guard against what Buss calls mate poachers. According to his research, the vast majority of subjects who are the victim of "love thieves" admit to fantasies about killing them, often in painful and gruesome ways.

Buss has identified more than 19 strategies designed to ward off a threatening rival. One favored by women, he says, is telling the straying mate that she'll change to please him, then devoting herself to becoming his ideal of physical attraction. Others range from staying by a partner's side at a party to throwing acid on a rival's face to murder. As to what causes an escalation from vigilance to violence, Buss says, "Unfortunately, we don't know, especially in terms of 'snapping.' However, one thing we do know, based on my research, is that women who are married to men with high income and status are more likely to devote intense efforts to mate guarding."

Clara Harris, the Houston dentist, followed the evolutionary playbook practically to the letter. After learning that her husband, David, was having an affair, she went so far as to sit him down and have him list a point-by-point comparison between her and his mistress, Gail Bridges. In the week before she ran him over him repeatedly in her Mercedes, Clara signed up at a tanning salon and a gym, had her hair and nails done daily, shopped for sexy clothes, and put down a deposit to have her breasts augmented and her thighs liposuctioned, she told Oprah in an August 2005 interview. Whatever the mistress was or did, Clara would be or do better. Including sex. When she found out the cheating couple was doing it three times a day—Bridges had even given David a schedule: 9 p.m., 2 a.m., and 6 a.m.—Clara tried to have sex with him six times a day. "Well, I doubled that to prove to him I could be that and more," she said.

The murder, Clara maintains, was an accident. After David promised to break off the affair, the awful shock of seeing him—at the same Hilton hotel where they'd gotten married, no less—with his mistress sent her into a mental fog from which she can't wrest much detail. Clara claims it was Bridges's SUV she meant to hurt, not her husband. The jury didn't buy her argument, and in February 2003 sentenced her to 20 years.

In an intriguing coincidence, that Hilton parking lot lies directly across the street from NASA-Johnson Space Center, where Nowak worked. Whether Clara Harris is innocent or not, at least one journalist believes the secretive, male-dominated culture that permeates the area—a part of Houston called Clear

Lake—could have helped push her over the edge. "The wife is supposed to stay at home and raise the kids and be beautiful and keep her feelings and her pain to herself," says Suzy Spencer, author of *Breaking Point*, a book about another Clear Lake murderess, Andrea Yates, who was married to a NASA engineer and killed her five children. "So when Clara, who had already bucked that system by being a successful career woman, realized she was losing her husband to a receptionist, that was just a huge slap in the face. Keeping all that pain inside so that everything looks perfect builds up in these women until they have to explode. It's like shaking up a full Coke bottle and opening it immediately. It's gonna spew. And unfortunately it can spew with fatal results."

Which brings us back to the big question: With brains evolved to fight for our mates, could we all snap? Under the right set of love-gone-wrong circumstances, is each of us capable of committing an act so completely irrational, so utterly out of character, that we barely recognize the person who perpetrated it?

There's no definitive study or body of research on the topic, but by all accounts the answer is no. While some women "lose control in a way that jeopardizes the public identity they have worked all their lives to achieve," as Becky Beaver, one of Texas's premier divorce lawyers puts it, legions of the rejected and brokenhearted take revenge in a way that, while embarrassing, doesn't make headlines or land them in jail.

Someone who's given a great deal of thought to the question of why one woman will snap and another won't is Bobbi Bacha. Clara Harris had hired Bacha's company, Blue Moon Investigations, to tail her husband. And Bacha was nearby when one of her investigators videotaped Clara during her murderous drive around the parking lot.

"I've seen cases much worse than Clara's," says Bacha. "I walked in on my husband doing it. He's on top of a car with my best friend. At first I wanted to just kill him. Kill her. I almost blacked out. Then I remembered my 9-month-old daughter. Then I wanted to kill myself. I actually had my plan, but my daughter was so cute. I had visions of her without me. So I took all that anger, all that hate, and I became the best PI I could." In fact, her idea of payback was to spend the next 20 years catching cheaters.

What saved Bacha, brought her back to earth, was her role as a mother, which trumped her identity as a wife. People who don't break character when they're betrayed, experts say, often have something else that defines them, like children, religion, a purpose in life; others who lose themselves entirely in their romantic relationships—and from what Beaver has observed, high-achieving women seem surprisingly prone to this—are more vulnerable to losing control. "Many professional women I know live in fear that they're going to be found out, that they are somehow overrated no matter how competent and successful they are," says Beaver. "Maybe that's what leaves some of them susceptible to being dependent on a relationship to the extent that it becomes part of their core identity. When confronted with the deceit or abandonment, they have no reservoir of inner strength to regroup when the relationship ends."

Despite how much has been made of Lisa Nowak's academic and career achievements, such prowess does not inure one to a lovesick breakdown, points out Lisa Mersky, an Austin psychotherapist. "Unfortunately," Mersky says, "there is no correlation between cognitive intelligence and emotional intelligence." She agrees that women who live mostly for—and through—their men, are in real danger if the relationship fails. The idea that a boyfriend or husband will "complete you" is a fantasy better left for romance novels. A more realistic, and healthier, expectation, she says, is that "maybe 25 percent of our emotional needs will be met by our partners." Which leaves resilient women to take responsibility for the remaining 75 percent—not only through finding meaning in work and family but by maintaining friendships, hobbies, and perhaps a spiritual life.

The ambitious, driven Nowak may have had trouble holding on to these resources. Her career had been all-consuming, and there's evidence that it was unraveling at the time Oefelein ditched her. Stephanie Wilson, the other female crew member who'd been on the *Discovery*, had been selected over Nowak for a future mission, according to fellow astronaut Michael Fossum. "Nowak was upset that she was not chosen for the job because it was probably her last opportunity for space flight," he told NASA's Office of Investigations.

"What was it that defined Lisa Nowak's identity at the time she snapped?" Brizendine poses. "Was it being a mom, a wife, an astronaut? Or had the love object, Commander O., seeped into her brain circuits, as lovers do? She had incorporated him into her own identity and let him define who she was. Without him, her very self snapped."

And what about the woman closest in the world to knowing how Nowak felt? A woman who loved the same astronaut with a wandering eye, and had as much justification to snap, if not more? That would be Michaela Oefelein. A business manager of a small technology services firm in the Houston area, where she lives with her two children, she'd been married to Bill when he started seeing Nowak. Although hesitant to discuss her role in the ordeal, she wrote in an e-mail, "I met Bill in high school (high school sweethearts), we went to college together, and the rest is history. I am a devout Christian woman, and I think that plays heavily on how I conduct my life and choices. So, I couldn't see myself reacting the way Lisa did. I have God, my children, family, and myself to answer to."

Like Bacha, in the moment of crisis Michaela Oefelein remembered how she mattered beyond what she meant to a man.

Something else that may save one from a disastrous reaction after being dumped is a sense of humor. The joke comedian Brett Butler used to tell comes to mind. Poking fun at the waifs in the Calvin Klein fragrance commercials, she'd say, "Honey, you don't know anything about obsession. Obsession is scrambling around in the bushes outside a married man's house after midnight with a machete in one hand and a jar of Vaseline in the other."

Humor allows one to step back from the abyss just long enough to gain a little perspective and channel murderous fantasies into a more creative, harmless avenue. It helped one graphic artist who found out her long-distance lover was cheating. Instead of killing him, which she felt like doing, she wrote his obituary, then faxed it to the paper in the small town where he lived.

Few people outside the cloistered society of the astronaut corps understand that world better than Stephen Harrigan. His novel *Challenger Park*, published in April of last year, about a married female astronaut, Lucy Kincheloe, who has an affair with a fellow astronaut, foretells Lisa Nowak's story with an eerie prescience. Harrigan spent endless hours researching life in and around the Johnson Space Center and could be writing about Nowak in this passage where he describes Lucy contemplating the impossibility of her forbidden love:

Tears did not fall in space. Without gravity, they simply hovered at the rim of Lucy's eyes... She found these little floating globes of sorrow fascinating, the way they lingered and seemed to comment on her passing moments of despair.

"Perhaps there's an element of such control and precision in the astronaut personality that they can be blinded to the fact that they're capable of falling in love," Harrigan says. "In a highly disciplined person, when that facade cracks, it cracks wide open. Maybe it made a difference that Lisa Nowak was an astronaut." In fact, something like this occurred to Billy Oefelein, as well. When detectives asked him if there was a friend Nowak might have shared her heartbroken feelings with, he said, "Lisa is a very private person...I cannot think of anybody that she would confide these things in. I don't know. Maybe that's part of the problem." Ever since he met her in 1996, he said, she'd always been "extremely levelheaded and nonemotional."

Harrigan goes on to talk about how high the stakes were for her. "Even though astronauts have to shove the thought of annihilation to the back of their minds, they understand that they have put not just their lives but their family's lives on the line. Perhaps the combination of traits that made Lisa Nowak so exceptional also made her breakdown so exceptional."

Harrigan also points out that Nowak began her desperate journey just three days after the fourth anniversary of the *Columbia* disaster, when the space shuttle disintegrated upon reentry, killing all seven astronauts onboard. One of them was a close friend of Nowak's. "The destruction of *Columbia* was a traumatic wound for everyone involved," says Harrigan. "It had a tremendous effect." Speaking of the intensely close relationships that astronauts must develop as they put their lives in their comrades' hands, Harrigan suggests that "in this particular pressure cooker, the constant knowledge of death creates a galvanizing personal bond among the shuttle crews."

Lisa Marie Nowak is scheduled to stand trial at the end of September on charges of kidnapping with intent to harm, burglary of a vehicle with assault, and battery. There is hardly a more poignant image than her mug shot: hair a demented frizz, shoulders hunched, head ducked, neck tendons tensed for the blow that

is to come, brows lowered over eyes ringed in smeared mascara and grown huge with haunted pleading, forehead wrinkled with a sorrow that is almost simian in its sheer animal nakedness. To compare that photo to the one on the NASA Web site of a serenely kempt woman, resplendent in orange space suit, wedding ring glittering, beaming in front of the flag, is to remember that all the astrophysics in the universe may never quite explain the human heart.

Yet it is that simian wrinkle in the mug shot we keep coming back to. It wobbles across Nowak's forehead directly in front of a brain that is a pudding of hormones and chemicals and inheritances from the Stone Age, but a brain that also has the miraculous ability to understand itself. Just as the diaper was an almost too perfect symbol of helpless animal need, that wrinkle could be the line drawn at the bottom of a long sum about to be totaled by Lisa Marie Nowak as she realizes all she has lost by losing it.

Sarah Bird writes for Texas Monthly, and is the author of The Flamenco Academy (Knopf).

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