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Some Die Young. Narratives of Loss, Mental Illness, Substance Abuse, and Masculinity

By
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Abstract

This is an ethnographic and an autoethnographic study based on qualitative interviews as well as memories and experiences of the author. It focuses on two men that were childhood friends of the author and who both died prematurely. Marcus died in November 2013 while he was under psychiatric care due to auditory hallucinations and anxiety. Noel died little over a year later, in January 2015, from an overdose of heroin. The aim of the article is to analyse the narratives of women and is concerned with understanding the loss of a son, a brother, or a former boyfriend or friend due to substance abuse or mental health problems. The empirical cases analysed in this text are women's understandings of the deaths of Marcus and Noel – two young men who were close to them in different ways. Their narratives about the men, their memories, and their rationalisations for what happened to them are analysed. The analysis shows that when the women talk about, and try to explain, the male lives that led up to the death, a limited number of narratives are available. Narratives about absent and/or abusive fathers, narratives about mothers who fail in providing the expected care, and narratives about shortcomings in psychiatric services and community support are dominant in the analysed material. In relation to these available narratives, the story follows the making of a protest masculinity in which elements such as rock star dreams, violence, drug use, and talk of legalising drugs have a place. Together they form an overarching narrative about protest masculinity; i.e. ways to act in reaction to a perceived alienation or subordination by acting out in ways associated with masculinity.

Keywords: Autoethnography, protest masculinity, violence, interactive interviews, power, powerlessness.

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Introduction

Marcus, Noel, and I met as pre-teens in the mid-nineties. We became friends and grew up together, before we fell out of touch. I had two children at a fairly young age, and Marcus and Noel continued to do the things we enjoyed as teenagers; basically, drinking and hanging out with friends. They had work from time to time, and Marcus enrolled in music classes but never finished them. He played the drums. Noel played the guitar. They had a band together.

I ran into them occasionally. We stayed in touch through social media. Marcus died in November 2013 while he was under psychiatric care due to auditory hallucinations and anxiety. I had not seen him for at least three years at that point. He died from suffocation due to inhalation of his own vomit. The autopsy report lists a long line of substances found in his blood. During his stay in psychiatry, he had received a variety of medicines—antipsychotics, antidepressants, and sedatives—some of which were given intravenously in attempts to reverse the psychosis. There is no definite medical explanation given for his death, but the coroner's hypothesis is that his body could not manage to function properly with all of the drugs in his system.

Noel died little over a year later, in January 2015, from an overdose of heroin. He was found dead on the couch at a friend's house. This article is based on a study where personal experiences of loss and grief are important points of departure. The narratives—including my own—about the lives of two individuals who both died young are used to gain knowledge on how social vulnerability can be understood. The study focuses on class and gender structures, and especially on the kind of protest masculinity (Connell 1996; Connell 1991) that can be articulated in masculinity constructions positioned outside of hegemonic masculinity.

The aim of the article is to analyse the narratives of women and is concerned with understanding the loss of a son, a brother, or a former boyfriend or friend due to substance abuse or mental health problems. How do women who have been close to a man who has died due to overdose or mental illness understand that loss? What are the narrative elements present in their understandings of premature death? I will show that when the women talk about, and try to explain, the male lives that led up to the death, a limited number of narratives are available. In the analysis, narratives about absent and/or abusive fathers, narratives about mothers who fail in providing the expected care, and narratives about shortcomings in psychiatric services and community support are focused on. In relation to these available narratives, the story follows the making of a protest masculinity in which elements such as rock star dreams, violence, drug use, and talk of legalising drugs have a place.

Method and Material

When my friends died, I decided to contact their mothers and start up a research process that also was a grief process for me (cf. Paxton 2018; Ellis 1995). When I contacted their mothers, I already knew I wanted to write about my dead friends, but what kind of project it would be has emerged gradually and in dialogue with the research persons.

This is an ethnographic and an autoethnographic study based on qualitative interviews as well as on my own memories and experiences. The first interviews were performed in June 2016, and ten interviews have been carried out so far. The project is still on-going, and what I present in this article is an analysis of parts of the material gathered from 2016 to 2018—namely the interviews with four women who were a part of Marcus's and Noel's lives: Marcus's sister, Noel's former girlfriend, and both of their mothers.

I use an autoethnographical approach to be able to situate myself as a researcher in the empirical field (Svedmark 2016:45f). Autoethnography can be defined as an extension of the discussions of anthropology and ethnology regarding the role of the researcher as a co-creator of the empirical material, and about self-reflexivity as an essential part of methodological work in ethnography (e.g. Clifford & Marcus 1986; Geertz 1973; Willis 2000; Wulff 2016). Autoethnographical methods are often used when there are personal connections between the researcher and the field. It is an approach that "acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist" (Ellis et.al. 2011:274; cf. Reed-Danahay 1997:2).

I practice autoethnography by not acting as a neutral researcher in the interviews I have performed. I too—like the interviewees—am a woman who was close to Marcus and Noel during a part of my life. I have shared my own memories of Marcus and Noel with the interviewees in order to spark conversations and construct narratives together with them (cf. Paxton 2018:116). To some extent I have also talked about preliminary analyses with my research participants. This method is similar to what Carolyn Ellis has discussed as interactive interviewing (Ellis et al. 1997; Ellis et al. 2011:279), a method that can "enhance relational intimacy with interviewees" (Paxton 2018:154). Interactive interviewing is part of the autoethnographic method and is used in order to "gain intimate and new understandings of people's experiences with sensitive topics" (Paxton 2018:145; cf. Ellis et al. 1997). This way of performing interviews has enabled the interviewees to give counter narratives and interpretations at times when they do not agree with mine. It has also helped them to deepen some of their own interpretations and understandings.

I think masculinity is interesting to study also from women's perspectives, and studies on masculinity are not just a concern for men who talk about other men. The women in my material tell me how their lives have been affected by the experience of living close to destructive men. Their stories are an important part of the creation of knowledge about men, masculinity, and women's approaches to men. I understand their stories as tools to better understand the consequences of criminality, substance abuse, and mental illness in the lives of young men and their friends and families. By focusing on people who knew men with these problems, I try to take the knowledge they gained through these relationships seriously. The women's stories are, of course, part of the same discourses on masculinity as those to which men would also relate, but based on the gender positions available, women are probably able to express a somewhat different story.

The questions and themes for the interviews have been adjusted to the different interviewees, but the main theme for each interview has been the interviewee's memories of Marcus and/or Noel focusing their recollections on how they got to know Marcus and/or Noel, what kind of relationship they had, if they remember how they were informed of their deaths, and what they remember from the last time they met or spoke to them. The core element here is our mutual efforts to try to understand the deaths of Marcus and Noel, even though it is impossible to gain absolute answers about why they died. The fragments of memories that the research persons chose to share with me all have in common that they give keys to the interviewee's understanding of what happened to Marcus and Noel. The goal of the interviews has been exploration and reflection about the loss of people that we have in common—as friends and family. The interviewees are a part of my analysis, and I am a part of theirs, even though we have different points of departure and knowledge that we try to merge in our conversations with each other. The quotes in this text should be perceived as what Ellis has called "co-constructed narratives" or as "jointly-authored" (Ellis et al. 2011:279). I hope that this strategy of including myself to such a high degree in the conversations has made my interviewees feel more included in the research process as well.

In the project I have to be ethically considerate to both the living and the dead research subjects, but I cannot deal with the two categories in the same way. The ethical guidelines that we as researchers are obliged to follow primarily protect the living (e.g. The Swedish Research Council 2017[1]), even though some of the principles are applicable also to the dead (Wilkinson 2002). The project was formally reviewed and approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority. I have anonymised both living and dead subjects, but for obvious reasons it has not been possible to inform Marcus and Noel about the study or to gain their consent. People who knew me growing up might also recognise Marcus, Noel, and their families; but, in that context, it is already widely known what happened to them,

so my research does not involve any major revelations for people who knew them and me back then.

Further, I have been careful in how I have approached their living friends and relatives, and I have gained their consent continuously. They have also read some of the things I have written previously—both before and after they were published—to be able to respond to how they have been represented in the text (cf. Lalander 2009:60; Ellis et al. 2011:281). So far, none of the research subjects have objected to anything I have written. The people closest to my friends have been very clear with their wish that the story of their dead loved ones should be told. I have respected their wishes, and we have had repeated discussions about research ethics and about what they are comfortable with sharing about themselves and about Marcus and Noel.

Analytical Framework

The empirical cases analysed in this text are women's understandings of the deaths of two young men who were close to them in different ways. Their narratives about the men, their memories, and their rationalisations for what happened to them are analysed.

In the analysis I have paid attention to the narratives—or stories—of the interviewees. I use narrative and story here as synonymous concepts—mainly for linguistic reasons (cf. Mattingly 1998:7). An approach to narrativity enables me to make a supple analysis where what the interviewees say is always at the heart of the matter. This allows me to focus on both human action and interaction and on the experiences and meaning-making of the interviewees (cf. Mattingly 1998:8). Anthropologist Cheryl Mattingly claims that "[a]ttention to human suffering means attention to stories" (Mattingly 1998:1; cf. Custer 2014; cf. Raab 2013:14). To reshape experiences into narratives is about communication—"the very human need to be understood by others" (Mattingly 1998:1). And, as Mattingly argues, the need to be understood becomes even more important when communicating illness, death, or other hardship compared to more mundane experiences (Mattingly 1998). In a similar manner, Anatole Broyard has stated that the narration of difficult experiences is about regaining control: "Always in emergencies we invent narratives" (Broyard 1992:19). On the basis of such an argument, I believe that attention to narrative is particularly appropriate—or inevitable—in this study.

Masculinity can be understood as an important part of how Marcus and Noel are interpreted by the survivors in order to make their deaths comprehensible. Raewyn Connell defines masculinity as "a socially constructed form of life or project in time, which appropriates the bodily difference of men from

women into a social process of gender" (Connell 1991:143). Masculinity is always constructed in relation to something—to femininity or to other masculinities (Connell 1996; Sernhede 2001:267). Especially the concept of protest masculinity has become central to the analysis. Protest masculinity is Connell's concept and is used to problematise how people with male-coded bodies can use practices such as reckless driving or violence to handle emotions of powerlessness by claiming a gendered position of power (Connell 1996:137; Connell 1991:158); Silow Kallenberg 2016:166). This can be explained as an articulation of power and powerlessness at the same time. Following Connell, one could argue that men who have an unchallenged place within normative masculinity do not have to use exaggerated masculinity expressions and practices such as violence. Men who feel in power do not need to protest (Connell 1996:108). Articulations of protest masculinity can be understood as both acts of resistance and acts of power and are used by men to create a space of subjectivity.

Marcus: Mental Illness and Masculinity

Marcus died at the age of 28. I shall start the analytical part of this article by analysing the narratives about Marcus, provided by his mother Agneta and sister Jessica—in co-creation with me (cf. Ellis et al. 2011:279).

When I first interview Agneta about the death of her son, two and a half years has passed since he died. Agneta describes the circumstances that characterised Marcus's childhood with an alcoholic father (Pelle) and other events that she interprets as the beginning of his troubles. This is the lens through which she sees Marcus's problems and the reasons for his death.

> Marcus's dad is an alcoholic. So, he is brought up with an alcoholic around the house. When those periods occurred, which you thought would be the last one every time, it was very hard. You see a dad that changes from Doctor Jekyll to Mister Hyde. Terrible. Of course, it affects you. And then, during your whole childhood, the promises that are not honoured time after time. And… when we had separated and lived in different places and Marcus called to ask how his dad was doing, he was imposing guilt upon him, his dad. 'You only call when you want something' (impersonates a drunk person). Because he was never sober. If he was sober, he could be nice and friendly, but it was not always so that Marcus managed to call him on those occasions. […] And the things he did. Physically and psychologically, that naturally leave their mark.

The lack of a healthy and present father figure is a well-known aspect in narratives of men who develop personal problems (e.g. Johansson 2001), and this is well studied in psychological research (e.g. Markowitz & Ryan 2016; Sikweyiya et al 2016). James Garbarino (1999) describes two patterns through which the influence of fathers affects the development of young boys—the *presence* of a father who abuses or neglects the child, and the *absence* of a loving and caring father (Garbarino 1999:67). In her narrative, Agneta connects to this well-known social-psychological trope when she explains why Marcus developed addiction problems and mental illness. Cultural and social researchers have shown how narratives about absent and aggressive father figures are constructed discursively and how they are so dominant that they sometimes risk overshadowing all other images (e.g. Johansson 2001:161). It is possible that, because of the discursive dominance of these fathers' images, Agneta attaches greater importance to Pelle's actions during Marcus's childhood than they would otherwise have had in the light of his death. It is a narrative figure that is available to talk about men's problems and the causes of them.

In the interview with Marcus's sister Jessica, we also talk about Pelle and the violence she remembers from her childhood. She has fragmented but vivid memories of certain episodes where Pelle mistreated his family, but in contrast to the narratives of their mother, Jessica also talks about how Agneta responded to Pelle in these altercations.

> I remember fragments. I remember how he stood outside of our building where we lived and yelled. He had been away somewhere drinking, and he returned, and the cab stood there for hours. And I remember thinking that it must be so expensive to pay for that cab. When he didn't have a key, he stood outside yelling. All sorts of nasty things. Marcus was the one who was saddest in all of that. I don't think that I was very sad. He and mom both cried a lot. This erratic behaviour is something that characterised my childhood, and you learn to read other people. I'm an expert on that today. You become so vigilant. You learn that when someone is a periodic alcoholic. You can hear: okay he has been drinking. You hear that immediately. When he was out there screaming, all three of us stayed in the same bed together. And we hugged. Or we went to our grandmother's house in the middle of the night. Or, I sat there while he was screaming at my mom for hours. She didn't say anything. She is a strong person, charismatic and things like that, but when it comes to relationships, people just walk all over her. She ends up in the wrong relationships with these idiots who take

> up all the space. She can be very outgoing, but when it comes to men it is totally hopeless. So, he walked all over her, and she tried to reason with him, sometimes, but most of the time she just sat there and didn't say anything. She was quiet and he screamed that she was a whore and whatnot.

Jessica describes memories from the childhood she shared with Marcus. She says that she remembers fragments, and I interpret this as a description of not being able to distinguish one situation from another. Jessica remembers both Marcus and their mother as sad, and her own position in relation to these experiences of a violent man is one of a capable and mature child. She describes her mother in quite the opposite way, as a person who has many nice qualities but who is incapable of asserting herself in relation to men.

The narrative of the alcoholic father and his abuse of his family is important for both the mother and the sister in their understanding of what went wrong. What separates the narratives of the two women is that in the interview with Jessica she also places a part of the responsibility on Agneta for not being able to look after herself and her children. This is another central narrative in my material —about failing mothers. Jessica's mother was a victim, but she was also an adult who should have been looking out for her children. The ways in which Jessica can be interpreted as to some extent blaming her mother for Marcus's ill health can be understood as a potentially complicated situation from a research ethics point of view. However, I know that Jessica and Agneta have a good relationship today and that they have talked about these issues even before they discussed them with me.

Jessica describes how she, as a young girl, shouldered a large part of the responsibility for keeping the family safe.

> I know that I tried to relieve her many times when he had been yelling for hours. I went to sit down next to them and started to argue against him. A little bit like: 'Look at me instead, you can talk to me instead'. And I told her to go to bed, and she and Marcus went to bed, because they were always together. They went to bed to sleep, and I stayed and argued with him for some hours. And at that time, I was younger than twelve.

In this narrative she again positions herself as a child who is more capable than her adult mother in relation to expressions of the violent man. In situations such as the one described, Jessica as a girl under the age of twelve took her mother's place as the object of Pelle's aggression. She describes doing this to give Marcus and Agneta the possibility of slipping away and escaping the yelling and harsh words.

Jessica describes how the insecure living conditions shaped her personality in a very different way compared to Marcus. She talks about having become attentive to other people and their behaviours. Compared to Marcus her life took a whole other road where she now works as an elementary school teacher, has four children of her own, and has foster children to care for. Marcus could hardly take care of himself, while Jessica seems to be very capable of caring for other people. Her own interpretation of the differences between them is that the fact that she always knew Pelle was not her biological father helped her maintain a certain distance to the things she was exposed to. Beverley Skeggs (1999) writes about how taking care of other people is part of feminine cultural capital and how caring practices can be a strategy especially available for working-class women to create a space of respectability (Skeggs 1999:91ff). Perhaps a part of the explanation of the differences between the siblings is also that the life path Jessica chose—or ended up following—is one that is more open for women compared to men. The differences between the siblings can therefore be interpreted as gendered differences to some extent.

Eventually—when Jessica was about sixteen years old and Marcus was about nine—Agneta left Pelle. The breakup was as dramatic as the relationship had been. Jessica remembers being on summer break from school when Pelle abused Agneta physically one night. Jessica was not home at the time, but Marcus was present when it happened. Agneta told her what happened before she and Marcus left to stay with their grandmother. Jessica stayed at a friend's house for a while. Eventually they got their own apartment with help from the social services, but Pelle continued to call and threaten the family.

> He was going to send a contract killer that he knew to come after us. He knew a lot of strange people, Hells Angels and what not. He was going to send someone to… exterminate us. Sometime around there I started to get panic attacks, and Marcus… he went to see a counsellor.

This part of the narrative is also a part of the story Jessica tells about how Marcus ended up having problems with mental health, but she also describes her own mental health issues instigated by the chaotic situation in the family. In connection to the events of Agneta leaving their abusive father, Marcus had his first contact with the psychiatric services. According to Jessica this was a rare event because Agneta wanted to keep the family issues private. Therefore, she seldom sought out professional help for herself or her children. To some extent, Jessica blames her mother for Marcus's psychological problems. She believes that he probably would have been better off if their mother had helped him seek out professional

help at an earlier stage. Jessica was in high school at the time and did not get any professional help for her panic attacks. She had to manage on her own.

As I remember it, Marcus was alright during his adolescent years. He was social and his grades were good. He was popular and had many friends and girlfriends. This all changed when he was in his early twenties. Agneta talks about him becoming more and more paranoid in talking about how he would be killed at work or when going outside. During that time Agneta and Jessica took turns in having him live at their respective homes. Jessica tells me about when she first understood that Marcus was psychotic and in need of professional help.

> He sat at the counter in our kitchen, legs crossed, and talked about how he was going to call Obama. He had a solution to things like war and killings all over the globe. He sat there and just… waffled about it. And then I felt that he was in need of help. Like, this in not okay. He is on another planet, you cannot talk to him properly. […] He stayed with us for a few days. And I remember that he talked about stuff and stared out the window for hours. And I never met someone before that was psychotic, it was totally new, drugs too. Alcohol, yes, but that is a totally different thing. I didn't have any experience with drugs at all. […] And I said that I wanted to help him, that he couldn't suffer like that. But he never got to that point where he wanted help. He was just mad at me because he felt that I was working against him. He wanted to legalise drugs. That was his goal. Because drugs helped him.

What Jessica describes here are some of Marcus's delusions. Jessica felt that something was terribly wrong with him and how she never felt that Marcus got to the point where he really wanted help. At least not from her. According to Jessica, Marcus believed that more drugs was the solution, even though she offered to help him. The narrative figure of men not being able to talk about their emotions is present here (see Nilsson & Lövkrona 2015:35; de Boise & Hearn 2017:781), and perhaps it serves as a comfort to Jessica. If Marcus's unwillingness to confide in her had something to do with him being a man, then maybe there was nothing she could have done to save him. The talk of legalisation of drugs could also be understood as an aspect of protest masculinity. Marcus was falling mentally ill, and perhaps the talk about legalisation of narcotics was his way of handling emotions of powerlessness (cf. Connell 1996:137; Silow Kallenberg 2016:166). Protest masculinity is an articulation of power and powerlessness at the same time because it is a way of claiming power based on an aberrant or subordinate position —in Marcus's case the position as mentally ill.

Both Agneta and Jessica are critical of the care he received from the psychiatric services, and this is another narrative theme present in the material to explain why Marcus is no longer alive. Agneta is unsatisfied with what she believes was a too heavy focus on medications.

> They don't do anything. Nothing. He got worse every year. Heavier medication, and worse problems. The last year… he was like a zombie. He was admitted throughout the whole winter of 2012 to 2013. At that point they had started giving him the medications intravenously. This was supposed to work better. But it meant that he had to go back to the hospital every six weeks to refill it. I am against all of these things myself. I tried to get him to try alternative treatments, and I tried to talk to him in every possible way. But he wanted to do it his way.

Here she describes her frustration of not being able to help Marcus, and with the psychiatric services that according to her offered him the wrong kind of help that only made him worse. This can be understood as a narrative about her being a good mother trying her best to help Marcus and to care for him. This can also be understood as a description of how Marcus tried to free himself from the influence of his mother by doing things his way. Perhaps he was protesting towards her as well. Jessica is also disappointed in that they could not manage to help Marcus.

> Some people smoke some cannabis, and they are fine anyway. But he was growing up with substance abuse and his dad is a user. My grandfather is also a user. Mom doesn't seem to have the addict genes in her, but maybe it is inherited anyway. I don't know. It is hard to help when no one sees or knows anything. But it is also about the psychiatry that is not very good. They released him and they didn't manage to lift him out of the psychosis. Medicines that didn't work. Maybe he was an impossible case. I don't know. But that was what he was struggling with the whole time, and they couldn't help him.

Her narrative also includes aspects that suggest how both environmental factors and inherited addiction might have been a part of the explanation for why Marcus died. Here, she connects to well-known and used explanations of addiction and other human hardships (cf. Silow Kallenberg 2016:82ff). Issues relating to the importance of heritage versus environment for human development and personalities have been discussed for centuries in Western societies (Silow Kallenberg 2016:82). Further back in time, the discussion took place mainly within a religious and philosophical context, while it has recently moved into

primarily a psychological and medical discourse (Silow Kallenberg 2016:84; Svenaeus 2013:28; Björkman 2001:276).

In a way, Jessica's story is a story of negative heritage that is transmitted among the men in their family—both socially and biologically. In her explanation as to why some people can use drugs and be just fine, and why this was not the case for Marcus, Jessica uses different elements of explanation. It is not the drugs themselves she sees as the problem, but his poor conditions for being able to use drugs and still feel good. Hereditary predispositions to addiction from his father, lack of care from his mother and the rest of his social context, and a psychiatric service that failed to help Marcus despite him seeking help are the reasons she highlights in her story about why Marcus is no longer alive.

Noel: Substance Abuse and Masculinity

Noel died at the age of 30 from an overdose of heroin. His mother—Maria—remembers her thoughts from when she found out about the cause of death.

> When he died, I didn't understand how many drugs he had been on. And that he was using heroin. I was completely shocked when I read the papers from the coroners' office. He didn't just have the heroin in his system. It was a list of many substances that I don't even remember the names of.

Maria knew that Noel had used drugs before, but at the time of his death she thought that he was clean. The last time he wrote to her on Messenger, he said that he was following a so-called 12-step programme to stay drug-free. Reading the papers from the coroners' office created a feeling of shock, probably because of the discrepancy between Noel's actions and what he claimed to be doing. The blood samples told a different story of who he was; one that Maria did not recognise.

She also started to see aspects of Noel and his life in a different light after he passed away. Death, and the information about his death, altered her understanding of her own memories. She talks about him as a little boy and has begun to look at his expressions of aggression as a young boy as signs of what were to come.

> When he was very young, he had not yet learnt how to walk. We got up one morning and I was about to make him some porridge. And he pointed 'ookie, ookie'! He wanted to have a cookie from the top cabinet. 'No', I said, 'we will have porridge first'. And he kept on. So, I had to say, 'No! Not now!' Then he looked at me, and his eyes turned dark. He sat down and he banged his forehead on the floor. Two times. He was black and blue, a big fucking dent. He hit himself so hard, and then he started

> to cry. Then I felt: 'Is it normal for such a small child to hurt himself like this?' I took him to the doctor the next day. They just laughed and said something about, 'Oh, what a temperament'. That was the answer I got. But already back then I thought that this is not normal, this is self-harming behaviour in a small child.

I believe that she probably would not have given this incidence so much significance in retrospect if Noel's life had taken another course. Maria does not say so, but her narrative of the episode suggests that the aggression must have been something inherited, something that her upbringing could hardly affect (cf. Silow Kallenberg 2016:75). Perhaps—in her narrative—Noel's behaviour has something to do with him being a boy. Her narrative is also about positioning herself as a loving and responsible mother. In the story, she does not feed her child cookies before breakfast. She is worried about her child and takes him to the doctor. At the doctors' office she feels that her concern is not taken seriously. She feels that they laugh at her and belittle her problems. This confirms her feeling of being alone and lacking control, which is a topic she returns to several times during the interview, for example, when she talks about her sons growing up and her relationship to their father.

> I feel that I have always been alone with them. I have been the one taking responsibility. And Noel had always wanted to be with his daddy. And, I read the court records, and it was not an enjoyable read. Everything Noel had done was in there, what he had been charged with. And I was both sad and ashamed. And I thought: now I know why people looked at me funny. I understand it now.

Although it is Noel who was tried in court and convicted of his crimes, Maria feels ashamed. It is as if Noel was a part of her, and she feels as if she should have been able to control his doings in order to be the responsible mother she strived to be. She expresses the paradoxical position of having taken most of the responsibility for her children, and at the same time feeling like she did not take enough responsibility. In her study of female respectability, Skeggs discusses how practices of care and taking responsibility of others—in work contexts and at home—define respectability among women (Skeggs 1999:92). When Maria talks about how other people looked at her funny, and in her validation of their right to do so given the circumstances, she confirms central norms of female respectability. And although she expresses anger and disappointment towards the boys' father, who she believes was not sufficiently present in their lives, she accepts to some extent that there are different expectations that rest on mothers and on fathers respectively.

Noel's ex-girlfriend Cecilia tells me the story of how they met at a nightclub in Stockholm. He had walked up to her and told her that she was the most beautiful girl in the place. After they had been drinking and talking for hours, they decided to go home together. Here, Cecilia talks about the ride home with Noel.

> When we met, he was the sweetest. We were on the night bus home, on our way to my place. We had talked for quite some time, and I felt like… I was bigger than him. I was quite fit back then, even more than I am today. So, I was like: I can take him if he tries something (laughs). But I was never afraid of him.

Cecilia describes this as a romantic experience. At the same time, she talks about the considerations she made in relation to him. How she analysed her own bodily constitution in relation to his and decides that if he would in any way try to hurt her, she would be able to defend herself. As sociologist Ove Sernhede, among others, has discussed in relation to protest masculinity, it is not uncommon for these masculinity positions—marked by hardness and violence—to also be reconciled with affection and consideration with a mother or a girlfriend (Sernhede 2001:269, 277; Connell 1991:161; cf. Connell 1996). Connell also emphasises the importance of understanding masculinity positions as contradictory and multiple (Connell 1996; cf. Sernhede 2001:268). I interpret this apparent paradox of Noel being understood as sweet and a potential perpetrator at the same time as telling for the way women relate to men in heterosexual encounters on a general level and as saying something specific about how Cecilia interpreted Noel. Women have to protect themselves from potential violence by being attentive to men—this is a cultural norm that also has bearing in material conditions where men are responsible for a majority of the violent acts that are perpetrated[2]. Cecilia says that she was never afraid of Noel, yet something in the way he constructed masculinity must have signalled danger or violence. She read him as a potential threat—perhaps due to his use of alcohol that departed from hers and due to his bluntness as he approached her when they first met.

Cecilia describes the on-and-off relationship she and Noel had as a dramatic experience that departed significantly from the life she led. She describes herself as a normal person who liked to have regular routines when it comes to work, food, and sleep. She describes Noel as very different from that, but also as different compared to other men she has dated. To outline the difference between them, Cecilia talks about their different attitudes towards life itself and the probable reasons for why those differences came about.

> Cecilia: Do you know what he always said to me?

Author: No.

Cecilia: 'You know what Cecilia, I am going to become a beautiful corpse because I am going to die young'. He said that all the time. And I was like: 'Stop it!'

Author: Yes, I recognise that. That mentality. He didn't expect much from life. In a way.

Cecilia: Yes, exactly. And I was trying to figure him out. I was trying to get him to tell me something about his background. I didn't know anything. He told me he had a complicated relationship with his dad. I don't know how or why, but he said that they didn't have a good relationship. But he never talked about his mom, and I felt that he has to tell me what he wants to tell me. I cannot force him. And because he didn't say anything, I didn't pry either, and I think that you often talk when you want help. But it didn't feel like he needed any help. But probably he was going through a lot of things on the inside. He had a good job back then, he worked in construction as a tiller. In a way it was good. But he always wanted to become a rock star, that was what he was living for. He said that all the time. 'I am going to be a rock star.' And I was like, 'Yes… but you have to stop living as one'.

Knowing what happened to Noel, the remarks about him going to die young and become a beautiful corpse are striking. I believe that Noel was well aware of the destructiveness of his lifestyle when he said this, even though he might not have believed that it would end the way it did, with his premature death. I also remember Noel saying exactly those words on several occasions, and for a time growing up I shared his reckless attitude toward life. I believe that many teenagers do. But in light of what happened I understand his remark about dying young in another light, and this is the reason for my comment—in the conversation quoted above—about Noel not expecting much from life.

Noel's remark about dying young is also related to his dreams about becoming a rock star. I remember that he idolised musicians like Jim Morrison and Jimi Hendrix who lived fast and died prematurely. They were his role models, and when analysing how the interviewees understood Noel the category of protest masculinity is useful to interpreting their narratives about him. Perhaps Noel felt powerless, and maybe his way of regaining control was to act as if death was something he welcomed. Articulations of protest masculinity can be understood as both an act of resistance and an act of power (Connell 1996:137; Silow

Kallenberg 2016:166). It is a strategy available to and used by men to create a space of subjectivity, and perhaps this is how Noel should be understood: as a man who used his available attributes to create room for acting space. Perhaps his rock star dreams, and alcohol and drug abuse, should be understood as him protesting against a normative lifestyle that he, for some reason, felt that he would never achieve.

Cecilia positions herself as the one who was supposed to help him, and she positions Noel as a person who did not accept her help. She understands his poor relationship with his father as an underlying reason for him being the way he was. This is a narrative element that can also be recognised from how Marcus's sister and the mother understood his life—and the reasons for his death—as well. The narrative about the absent and/or abusive father is reoccurring in all of the interviews. But Cecilia also concludes in describing Noel's life at the time as good in terms of work and external circumstances. In this way, the choices he made are depicted as comprehensible and incomprehensible at the same time.

Cecilia knew Marcus too, but not as well as she knew Noel. On one occasion Noel was in jail for assault and Cecilia was really worried about him. She describes feelings of not knowing what to think or do. She called Marcus and they met at a bar one night to talk about what was going on with Noel. For Cecilia, this was an eye-opener into the way Noel and Marcus lived.

> We were sitting at this restaurant that was closing. I was going inside to pee, but they [the security guards] wouldn't let me. And I was like: 'I have been sitting outside and I just want to use the bathroom', and he [the security guard] was like, 'No, you can't'. And then Marcus got really pissed off, and he starts… And I just felt like, stop, I can pee on the street somewhere. We left then. And I felt that it was really easy for Marcus to snap, it could easily have gone sideways. I don't know, but if you are two people who hang out and Noel beat up a guard and spent time in prison for that. And I was also annoyed, but I could never hurt someone for a reason like that. Far from it. Marcus did not even need to pee. He was not even going inside of the place, but he was on his way to… and I needed to interfere. And I was like: 'Get out of here!' And then he almost started fighting with me instead. And we left. But it felt like a close call. If it had been Marcus and Noel who stood there, it could have become an incident. I think things like that were close at hand when they were out together. It doesn't take much for you get so upset that you hit someone, and that is very far from my own world, even when I drink. I mean, you have boundaries, you don't go around and hit people and things like that. Then I felt that I understood a little bit more about how they lived.

When Cecilia describes this episode as something very far from her own way of living and acting, it could be interpreted as an example of how she is constructing femininity, with her softer approach to being mistreated by the security guard compared to Marcus's. Or maybe she just tries to be another type of human being —regardless of gender. The episode could also be interpreted in terms of class —it is not respectable behaviour to fight security guards the way Marcus did (cf. Skeggs 1999). Cecilia can be said to take a middle-class position here when she distances herself from Marcus's behaviour, although she too can be understood as belonging to the working class. I would say that not every man would have reacted the way Marcus did in the described situation. I analyse this as a very specific construction of masculinity where intersections of a working-class identity, masculinity, and living in the peripheries of society come together. The violence, or possible violence, in this situation is a strategy used by men who cannot afford to be treated with indignity as in the situation at the bar that Cecilia describes. On the other hand, violence can be acceptable for men under some circumstances. Men who are understood as defending a woman are often culturally accepted (Nilsson & Lövkrona 2015:72; Connell 1991) and can therefore pass as part of normative masculinity.

It is also interesting to note that what Marcus was about to act out in this situation has a direct parallel to what Noel had already done to get himself put into custody. At the time, Noel was in jail for punching a guard, and in the situation, Marcus was arguing with another guard. My interviewees talk about the fact that there is a parallel between Marcus and Noel, and it is described in formulations that they always followed each other. This can be understood as an example of how their relationship contained common masculinity constructs that were expressed through the need to assert themselves and defend their rights—even physically when they felt it was justified.

For Cecilia, Noel was both a sweet and caring person and a troubled man with violent behaviours. Her somewhat ambivalent understanding of Noel in terms of whether he came off as aggressive or not continues to show throughout the interview, and she returns to the topic many times, probably because aggression was a part of their relationship, but not the only aspect of it. Her reflecting upon the topic could be interpreted as a way to describe Noel as a complex and full human being rather than just a violent man. Therefore, she opposes the view that Noel was a violent person.

> It was not like he raised his voice. We never fought. It was more like I was annoyed with what he was doing, but I never saw him angry. So, I don't really get it when he tells me he has been doing time because he abused someone. The Noel I know would never do that.

I ask Cecilia if she thinks that Noel had a hard time handling his emotions. I probably ask this question because this is a common interpretation of the underlying reasons for why men use drugs or violence, and it is also a central element in my understanding of what happened to Noel. As an answer to the question, Cecilia describes how Noel showed emotions towards her.

> I thought that he was very charming. And he said that he liked me in his own way. It was not like, 'I love you', but more like, 'Fuck I miss you so much, I want to be with you'. Words like that. And it was a lot of cursing, it was 'damn' or 'fuck' in every sentence. And, when it was just him and me, then he was like any person. I don't know how to explain... maybe he couldn't name the feeling, but he was good at showing his feelings. To me. He told me what I meant to him… and then he also showed it when he got angry, when I had done something that he didn't like. I understood that he cared, otherwise he wouldn't call me in the middle of the night to yell at me and be like, 'Do you understand what you have done to me?' He didn't just say it, he showed me too. I know that I meant something to him.

Cecilia describes Noel as someone capable of showing emotions, but not in the conventional way. He might not have shown emotions in public, but he did so privately towards her. Cecilia also interprets his anger as a sign of affection or love. Perhaps this is the reason for why she is able to interpret him as sweet rather than angry. His anger is placed in a context of love and affection, and not in the context of violence. In that way his yelling at her is not conceptualised as real anger. It can also be understood as a way for her to rationalise and legitimatise his violence, which is common among women close to violent men (Nilsson & Lövkrona 2015:61).

Her narrative is probably also a reaction to my question. I interpret her as trying to oppose my understanding of Noel as emotionally incapable. She gives a counter-narrative where Noel is someone who shows his emotions, and where he is 'like any person' instead of just a troubled young man.

Concluding Remarks

Marcus died due to issues related to mental illness, and Noel from an overdose of heroin. In this article I have discussed how women who knew them—including me—interpret their destructivity and deaths. Using a narrative approach, I have analysed how we—the interviewees and I—through interactive interviews (cf. Ellis et al. 1997) have tried to make sense of the lives and deaths of Marcus and Noel.

The interviewees' stories about Marcus and Noel are based on their experiences—but at the same time take shape based on available cultural images and explanatory models. This also applies to the way I think about, and talk about, Marcus and Noel. Narratives about absent and/or abusive fathers, narratives about mothers who fail in providing the expected care, and narratives about shortcomings in psychiatric services and community support are dominant in the analysed material. Together they form an overarching narrative about protest masculinity; i.e. ways to act in reaction to a perceived alienation or subordination by acting out in ways associated with masculinity (Connell 1996:128, 137; Silow Kallenberg 2016:237).

The men protest by acting violently and by expressing dreams and thoughts that are outside of normative life scripts. They protest against just such normative life scripts by expressing rock star dreams and ideas about legalising drugs and protest against their violent and/or absent fathers. They also protest against being positioned as mentally ill and against perceived demands. In the narratives of the women close to these men, their protests are an important part of the explanation for why they died. This seems logical to them based on established ways of talking about and understanding men and men's problems. There may be some truth to this, but at the same time it may be that reality is more complex than that and that these narratives are simplifications in an attempt to make difficult experiences understandable.

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Notes

1 The Swedish Research Council, 2017. "God forskningssed". https://www.vr.se/analys/rapporter/vara-rapporter/2017-08-29-god-forskningssed.html

2 Men are statistically more likely to be perpetrators of violent crime than women. This applies both to violent crimes where the victim is a woman and where the victim is another man. For current statistics from Sweden, see: https://www.bra.se/statistik/statistik-utifran-brottstyper/vald-och-misshandel.html#Konsfordelning

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