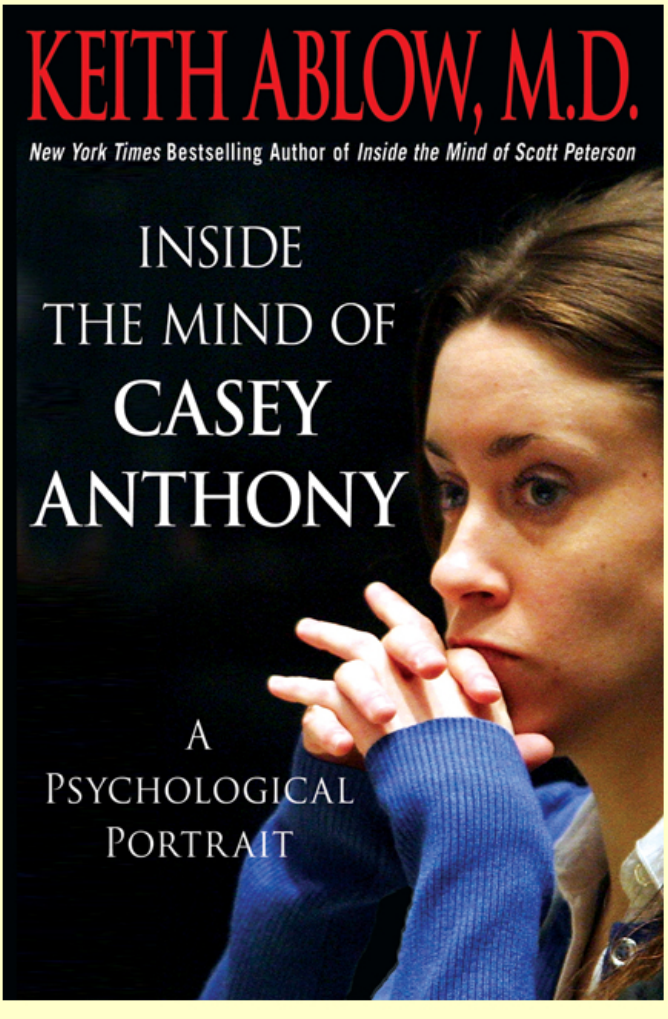
READ IT FIRST



Grateful acknowledgment to the band Sevendust for the use of their lyrics on p. xi and pp. 222–223.

www.stmartins.com

ISBN 978-1-250-00914-2

First Edition: November 2011

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

THE FACTS

On July 15, 2008, Cindy Marie Anthony dialed 911 to report that her granddaughter, Caylee Marie Anthony, a magnificent little girl just shy of her third birthday, was missing—and had not been seen for a month.

According to Caylee's single mother, twenty-two-year-old Casey Marie Anthony, she had dropped her daughter off at her nanny's apartment on June 16. When she'd returned there later that day, both the nanny and Caylee had vanished. Casey claimed she had then launched her own monthlong search to no avail.

The police investigation that ensued uncovered the unthinkable: Casey Anthony had invented much of her life story. She had no nanny. She didn't have the job at Universal Studios that she had been telling her parents about for years. She hadn't, as she had told her family, been traveling around the state of Florida with Caylee during the weeks between June 16 and July 15.

Casey Anthony, it turned out, was a kind of ghost—a woman with no real identity; no connection to her rageful, shattered inner *self;* and no person on this earth who really knew the truth about her.

Caylee was dead. She had been placed in a black plastic trash bag and thrown in the woods near the Anthony home at 4937 Hopespring Drive in Orlando, a cruelly ironic address for a house of horror.

SUFFOCATION

The story you are about to read is about suffocation—psychological suffocation leading to physical suffocation, leading to death.

This is a story about how toxic emotional forces in a family, unfolding over decades, slowly extinguished Casey Anthony psychologically, and then suddenly extinguished her two-year-old daughter, Caylee Anthony, physically.

Caylee Anthony was killed by a person who had never lived anything resembling a genuine life—was never really, truly alive at all—and, therefore, assigned no value to a little girl's life.

This transmutation of psychological death into physical death usually occurs without anyone taking notice. The victim's remains are buried and, with them, the true story of *why* that person was killed. The people who remain behind escape any postmortem examination. Even if one of them is tried for murder, the truth about the lethal psychological makeup of that person, or those surrounding her, may never be known. That shall not be the case here.

Does the link I suggest between psychological death and physical death surprise you? It shouldn't. One very often causes the other, though it sometimes takes two generations, or three, or even more for it to happen.

Emotional violence snaking its way through a family tree commonly snaps the newest, most innocent, most exquisitely vulnerable limb.

Looking at the corpse of a child, even combing through the physical evidence surrounding her disappearance, can't reveal her real cause of death. Hair samples, DNA, a skull left in the dirt all fail to tell the tale. But a painstaking examination of the psychological dynamics of those closest to her often will.

Few of us would deny that chronic emotional stress can eventually trigger a cardiac arrest, ending a man's life. The stress can act on blood vessels, causing them to clamp down, limiting the oxygen carried to the heart muscle, ultimately destroying that muscle. In some cases, the person doesn't survive.

Well, just as people need oxygen to feed their heart muscle, they need "emotional oxygen" to feed their souls and sustain that core identity we call the *self*.

Emotional oxygen is anything that reassures a person that she is a *real* individual, worthy of being treated as a complete human being. It includes all the times when others react to her behavior with genuine praise, concern, or even justifiable anger. It includes all those times when others honor her thoughts and feelings, listening to them with real attention, responding to them with real intention. In short, it includes all the ways she is affirmed as a person, rather than treated as a nonperson.

Emotional oxygen nurtures a person's developing humanity.

Mental, physical, or sexual abuse can suck all the emotional oxygen out of a home, psychologically suffocating one or more occupants. So, too, can subtle and toxic forms of communication that demand that one or more family members put themselves to sleep or bury themselves alive, suppressing their core identities until they are, for all intents and purposes, nonexistent. It can happen in the dark, under cover of night, as silently as carbon monoxide fills the lungs of children while they sleep.

Without enough emotional oxygen, a person can die spiritually. She can end up despising the truth because she despises the true story of her own psychological destruction. She can become a stranger to her own feelings, then immune to those of others, then hostile to genuine human existence itself. And then she—or, more likely, someone who is dependent on her—can die physically, whether by suicide,

murder, or even through carelessness that leads to an avoidable "accident."

In short, a family can be so devoid of emotional oxygen that it eventually becomes incompatible with sustaining human life.

The family in which Casey Anthony was raised, into which Caylee Anthony was born, and in which she died before her third birthday, would seem to be such a family.

A PROP

June 15, 2008, was Father's Day. Casey Anthony's mother, Cindy, who had just turned fifty, went to see her eighty-seven-year-old father, Alexander Plesea, at the Avante at Mount Dora Nursing Home in Mount Dora, Florida, a lakefront community twenty-nine miles from Orlando. She took her two-year-old granddaughter, Caylee, along.

Alexander Plesea was a first-generation Romanian-American. He had served in the United States Navy during World War II and, then, in the Korean conflict.

Alexander and his wife, Shirley, whom he met before he dropped out of high school, had had four children. Cindy was the youngest and the only girl. Her brothers Rick, Gary, and Daniel were five, ten, and eleven years older than she.

Alexander kept to himself and ran a tight ship while Cindy was growing up. He worked hard as a laborer and was bone tired when he got home. He had rigid expectations as to how his children should behave. He didn't hesitate to discipline them.

"He was a strange little man and had a hell of a temper," a close family member, who did not wish to be identified, told me.

"He didn't like us carrying on," his son Rick told me.

The Plesea family had little contact with other relatives and few, if any, friends. Their neighbor across the street, Sue Marvin, told me, "They were a very private family. They were in the neighborhood many years before we got to know them a little bit."

Maybe Alexander's own history had something to do with his tendency to isolate, and his short fuse. He, his brothers, and his sisters had reportedly grown up in an orphanage after their father placed them there following the sudden death of their mother. He was never adopted. When he finally got out, after psychological stresses one can only guess at, he went to work, then joined the navy. He got married soon after he was discharged.

The sudden severing of Alexander's bond with his mother (by death) and his father (because he felt he couldn't work and raise children at the same time), together with his being raised in an orphanage, wouldn't necessarily be enough to set dominoes falling toward a fatal catastrophe, but it could be. It is interesting to note that the same circumstances figure in multiple stories in which a family member eventually kills a child, including that of Scott Peterson—the Modesto, California, man who killed his wife, Laci, and unborn child, Conner, in 2002. Peterson's mother had been placed in an orphanage and was raised there.

Although Alexander seemed to be the disciplinarian of the family, his son Rick told me that he more commonly meted out punishments at the direction of his wife, Shirley. "She would just tell him what to do and he would listen. He was quiet around her, because he was totally controlled by her. He could be talkative and laugh one-on-one, but when he was with my mother, he was almost silent."

That doesn't seem surprising. Having lost his parents and been sent to an orphanage for his entire childhood, Alexander Plesea must have welcomed a woman who promised to make him part of a family. It makes sense that he wouldn't want to rock the boat and be thrown overboard again.

For her part, Shirley Plesea wasn't likely to yield to a man, anyhow. According to a close family member of hers, her father, Stiles, had abandoned the family when the children were quite young. Shirley herself was barely three years old.

Stiles had met another woman, taken off for Chicago, and gone to work in a steel mill. He never paid child support, though, and had almost nothing to do with his children. He left his wife, Velma, strug-

gling to support them as best she could. She went to work, and her own mother—Shirley's grandmother—stepped in to take care of the kids.

According to Shirley's close relative, Velma had once said, "Men are all right in their place, but I don't have any place for one."

Both Alexander and Shirley, then, were the products of fathers who turned out to be disastrously, catastrophically unreliable. They seem to have agreed that women should wield the power in a family.

"If you were just a few minutes late for dinner," one of Shirley and Alexander's children told me, "my mother would be very unhappy and very angry. If you showed up one minute late for an event, you'd hear about it. She made fun of the people she didn't like, who didn't suit her—not in front of them, but in front of us, which gave us the idea that you were supposed to fit her mold, or else. She was a control freak. That's where my sister, Cindy, learned it."

Even the Pleseas' neighbor Sue Marvin could tell that Shirley was the one pulling the strings in the family. "The mother was more in control," she said.

"Probably Shirley yelled at them a lot. They got hollered at a whole lot," Shirley's close family member told me.

Because she was the baby of the family and female, her brothers called Cindy "the Princess." They sometimes resented her because they felt she was doted upon and given material things and opportunities denied to them. Maybe she got screamed at less. It didn't help any that the family, which started out desperately poor, in a run-down neighborhood, living in a rented house in the projects, had a little more money available and was able to move to a slightly nicer area and buy a modest home when Cindy was about four. Her father eventually got steadier work, and her mother took a part-time job at Trumbull Memorial Hospital.

"My parents got by on the skimpiest budget at the beginning," one of Cindy's brothers told me. "If he had twenty or thirty cents at the end of the month, he'd take us down to the Sanitary Dairy in Warren and buy us an ice cream. A cone was a nickel. We were very, very poor for a long time. But it wasn't quite as bad as that during most of Cindy's childhood."

Maybe Cindy suffered because of her older brothers' jealousy. Maybe she resented her father's discipline or her mother's authoritarian style. Maybe she'd been called Princess, or teased in worse ways, one too many times. Maybe kids at school weren't all that kind about her living in what one of them described to me as a "ramshackle house." Maybe that explains why one of her classmates told me that she was extraordinarily quiet and shy in grade school. Maybe she did, indeed, gradually learn from her mother that a woman could achieve power by micromanaging those around her. Maybe something more unsettling happened in her family of origin—some painful chaos—when her dad lost his job and things got tougher and money got tighter and nerves were on edge.

Or, maybe, it was even worse than that. Maybe the trauma was severe. When I reached Cindy's brother Gary, who described himself as the "hermit" of the family, he told me he'd spoken to his sister only a few times over the past twenty years. "I have nothing to say to you," he told me.

"I just have one question," I said before he could hang up. "That's it. Just the one."

"Fine…" he said impatiently.

"A lot of people I've spoken with describe your sister, Cindy, as an extremely controlling person. In my experience, people that controlling often lived through things that were completely beyond their control. Sometimes, they suffered a lot because they couldn't protect themselves—whether emotionally or physically."

Ten seconds passed in silence—a long time without any words on a phone call between strangers. Then Gary finally spoke: "I'm not giving you that," he sputtered. He hung up.

I hung up, too, but slowly. I cannot say why, but I felt chills run up my back, as though I was at the heart of some kind of darkness.

Whatever her reasons, once she was old enough, Cindy Plesea made one decision after another that seemed designed—at least unconsciously—to make sure she was never disempowered again.

One of those decisions was to become a nurse. There are many

and varied motivations for such a noble career choice, but to some who knew her well, becoming a nurse seemed like a lock-and-key fit with Cindy's thirst for control.

Nurses are very much needed by the sick patients they tend to. They are, therefore, very powerful in the lives of those individuals and their families. You might be disappointed in the care rendered by a nurse, but you're unlikely to complain a whole lot while you're lying down in a hospital bed, wearing a johnny, relying on her for pain medications or sleeping pills—or oxygen. You might think of yourself as smarter than your nurse or prettier or more fit, but you aren't going to make a point of letting her know that. You might be richer than your nurse, but you aren't going to flaunt it.

When you're in the hospital, you're vulnerable, possibly at your very worst. And you want your nurse to want to help you, certainly not hurt you. The best way to do that is to make her like you, even if that means swallowing some of your pride, turning your complaints into suggestions, smiling now and then, even when you're suffering. The best way into a nurse's heart is to give up power to her, convey how much you need her, be careful not to be an irritant, and let her take complete control.

A nurse with lots of reasons to feel weak inside can still feel very powerful working her shift at the hospital. She can certainly still look very strong in today's hospital-issue scrubs, never mind the starched white uniform—dress, apron, hat, and all—worn by Cindy Plesea at the beginning of her career.

Interestingly enough, Cindy was dressed just that way, working as a nurse, when she met her husband, George Anthony. She was taking care of his sister Ruth, who was hospitalized.

George was still legally married at the time, but Cindy would later deny that fact to her own family.

When a member of the extended family alerted Cindy's mother to George's marital status, her mother reportedly replied, "Absolutely not. Cindy told me he's divorced."

The truth was already falling victim to Cindy's habit of controlling what people knew, and when they knew it—to essentially control what they thought.

Even if Cindy hadn't been in a position of ascendance while tending to George's sister, she still would have been able to exercise a lot of power over George. He was a very flawed person, in no position to take control of any other adult. His first wife, Terri Rosenberger VanDervort, thought of him as a "mama's boy and liar." His former sister-in-law remembers him as a "pussy."

Having grown up in a family in which both her parents were completely abandoned by their unreliable fathers, Cindy apparently wasn't about to try her luck yielding any control to a man.

"Cindy sissified him," VanDervort said.

Another person who knew George well told me that when he looked in his eyes, he saw "nothing there."

"No one around him knew George that well because there was nothing to know about George," that person added. "At least there was nothing he'd let you know."

George joined the Trumbull County Sheriff's Department at age twenty-two, but, according to a source of mine, he always cared more about the uniform than he did about the work. "His entire interest in law enforcement was in wearing his uniform and driving around in his cruiser. It was like a disguise. I think it hid a lot of his weaknesses."

A nurse in starched whites. A police officer in starched blues, with a license to carry. Maybe they were both simply wearing uniforms to do their jobs. Lots of people have to. Or maybe they were, psychologically speaking, hiding behind those uniforms.

George had reportedly told his first wife, Terry, whom he married in 1972 after she became pregnant, that he wanted to move away from Ohio and live in Orlando, Florida. When she asked whether he intended to apply for a job with the Orlando Police Department, he supposedly replied, "No, I want to be a character at Disney." That never happened, but it certainly would have taken the notion of hiding behind a costume to a whole other level.