

## LAST WORD

# When escape is the only option

Domestic abuse is often more about power than violence, said Natasha Gardner. This is one woman's story.

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**NOT LONG BEFORE** she fled, Krystal Ryan had \$650 to her name. Not his. Not theirs. Just hers. She'd been squirreling it away for a month, knowing he'd ask for it when the bills came. Make that demand it. If she didn't have it, he'd know something was up.

She used it to buy bus tickets to Denver, even though the purchase ate up \$585. It left the three of them—Krystal and her kids, 14-year-old Jay and 11-year-old Adara—with \$65 to start a new life. For shelter. To eat. Of course it wasn't enough; she couldn't think about that or she'd turn back.

Every dozen or so seconds in the United States, a woman is beaten, assaulted, or strangled. Domestic violence is the top cause of injury for American women between the ages of 15 and 44. It wasn't until the 1970s that many states finally agreed a wife could be raped by her husband. What seems intuitive now—that a wife and husband each have equal legal power over their bodies—was an ideological nuclear bomb in the '70s.

The laws remain difficult to enforce, partly because the term “domestic violence” is a misnomer. Abusive relationships often are less about actual violence than about control and power. Domestic violence involves a warped dynamic that—whether or not a criminal act has been committed—is often misunderstood by people outside the relationship.

By the time Terrance [not his real name] landed in Krystal's life, she wasn't looking for a man. She was 27, raising her children, paying the bills, and getting a licensed practical nurse (LPN) degree. She worked as a night auditor at a Ramada Inn in Virginia. He was an engineer from Houston who stayed there a few months while on a job. He showed up, and he kept coming back, night after night.

She rarely dated and never brought anyone home to meet her children, but Terrance proved to be too good to ignore. At 6 feet 3 inches, with powerful arms that he'd wrap around her, he quickly convinced her he was wonderful. Safe. He wanted to meet her kids. After three months, she agreed. “I am going to be the father figure,” he told them. “I love you guys. We're a family now.”

Krystal had one thought: “This is it.”

Maybe she saw a few warning signs. Terrance could be intensely protective. Didn't like her stepping out without her man. Didn't like

men talking to her at clubs. But that's because he was worried about her, right? He loved her and didn't want to share her with anyone else.

When he asked her to leave school early to join him at his new work site in Chicago, she agreed. It would be a honeymoon, a test. She left the kids with her half sister for a little while.

**KRYSTAL WAS FINALLY** letting go and allowing herself to trust someone. For a while, it was fun. There were parties. Nice cars. Dancing in hotel rooms. But one night he thought she danced too close to another man, and Terrance hit her. Another time, he saw a guy at a club approach her. Even though she was careful to point out her boyfriend, Terrance slapped her on the drive back to the hotel. She hit him in the forehead with her shoe. It drew blood. She wasn't a pushover. She'd fight back.

One night, they were at a cookout at the hotel and Terrance wanted to leave. Krystal wasn't ready yet. He hit her, grabbed her hair, and yanked her head back. When she woke up the next morning, she wouldn't leave the room. She'd been in Chicago less than a month.

A woman she'd met there kept calling; Krystal didn't answer. Finally, the woman came to the hotel and made a manager let her into Krystal's room. "Oh my," she said when she saw Krystal's face. "What happened?"

"I had a seizure," Krystal lied.

She couldn't stop lying to herself, either. He was so different most of the time. That wasn't the man she met. Every day wasn't bad. Something had gone wrong those times, and it wasn't his fault.

There isn't a definite predictor of why one person and not another becomes a victim. They don't look or act a certain way. Some live paycheck to paycheck; others never worry about the rent. Some have Ph.D.s; others never made it through high school. Some are outspoken; others are wallflowers. Their one commonality: They gravitate toward men who want to control them. This is why falling in love can turn out to be the most dangerous thing a woman ever does.

There is one semi-reliable way to tell if someone might become a victim: Children who grow up around domestic violence are 15 times more likely to be abused themselves. Even worse, boys who witness abuse at home are twice as likely to become abusers because they've been rewired to think it's normal.

As many victims do, Krystal stayed. Because she loved him. Because she thought having this man as a dad to her kids was better than having them grow up without one. Because she was afraid. Because she thought he'd stop.

He routinely tore her down. She was too black. Too fat. Too ugly. "Who is going to want you?" he'd ask. "No one is going to want you but me."

Verbal abuse, physical, it didn't really matter. She was already hurting—tired—before the abuse would even begin; so weary it

became almost mundane. But there were moments when he seemed like the man she'd met in Virginia. He'd stroke her back. Wrap his big arms around her. Even if those same hands had hit her the night before, she wanted him.

She stumbled upon a new way to delay his anger on the night of her 29th birthday. They were partying again, with friends, and Krystal was drunk. Terrance gave her cocaine. She didn't want to take it, but she did anyway. The next morning her nose was clogged, and she just didn't feel right, but he was so happy with her.

**THE MORE THEY** partied, the more they spent. Between their two jobs, the family should have been flush. Instead, they always seemed to live month to month. Then Terrance lost his job. Krystal picked up double shifts to keep the lights on and the coke supply high. She was solely focused on making this man happy. If that meant she showed up to work high or drunk, so be it. After last night's party, she needed to stay high to stay awake. And she needed to get high again tonight to keep him happy. She never seemed to sleep. Her boss started to comment on her persistent sinus infections.

What Krystal loved most about her work was the chance to help people. She could do her rounds with her elderly patients and forget—for a minute or two—what a mess her life had become. She was exhausted, so much so that one day, she sat down in a patient's room and didn't get up. She hadn't slept for three days. Now she did, while the patient she was supposed to be feeding lay helpless nearby.

She awoke to see her supervisor hovering over her. There were no excuses this time. She was fired.

In the next six months, she lost two more jobs. She'd never been fired in her life, but between the booze and the coke and him, she couldn't hold it together during the day.

Then one day a social worker from Child Protective Services visited her house. The woman began reading from a report. Everything she said was true. The children had recently spent the night sleeping on a neighbor's porch. Krystal had checked into a hospital that evening to recover from anemia and depression after yet another fight with Terrance, and she'd told the kids to stay at a nearby friend's house. When the neighbor wasn't home, Jay and Adara decided that sleeping outside—Terrance never hit the kids but was verbally abusive to them—was better than returning home without their mom.

The social worker knew about all of it: the fights, the drugs, the parties. But Terrance was home and came to the door, so Krystal lied. "No, my children were not outside," she said. "They were in the house, and I don't know who reported this."

Jay and Adara seemed to understand, too, because they quickly echoed the lies. The case was dropped.

Her fear intensified. She'd saved her kids from foster care, but for how long? What would she do the next time? So she said she was taking the kids for ice cream, and left.

Krystal and her kids arrived in Denver a few days later, after midnight, and the trio settled into an upstairs room at SafeHouse Denver, a local shelter.

Her first step was to get sober. It didn't require a 12-step program; with Terrance gone, she no longer needed to get high. She moved her family to transitional housing and enrolled the kids in school. Next, she found an apartment and a job as an elder-care assistant. For the first time she could remember, Krystal felt peaceful and content.

She was starting to feel normal again when she received an email from Terrance. He'd met someone new, and she was pregnant. It hurt Krystal because she still loved him. Even though his news should have been a relief—now he'd have less reason to track her down—she wrestled with jealousy. Terrance was with another woman who was carrying his child. He was stroking her back and wrapping his thick arms around her.

And if she was being honest with herself, he was probably slapping her around, too.

**KRYSTAL MOVES AROUND** the south Denver elder-care center where she's the activities director. She works with patients who suffer from dementia. Her job enables her and the kids to live in their very own house through Section 8 assistance. She makes about \$15 an hour, decent enough money, but she doesn't have insurance. "I have days [when I realize], I'm a single woman again. I'm almost 40 years old," Krystal says. "How did I get to this point in my life?"

These days Adara is sharp-witted yet kind, and so unlike the withdrawn girl she'd been in Houston. She only holds her head down now when she's scared—"Not very much!" she boasts. She thinks about her future, hoping to be a professional basketball player in Europe. Or a chef. Maybe both: a traveling chef who shoots hoops.

Jay, the son who Krystal once feared would end up in jail, is a high school senior on track to graduate this month. Then he's off to community college. Hopefully, he'll transfer to CSU after a year. He's got the grades. He's interested in studying journalism and hip-hop fashion, and he'd also like to travel.

Most nights, Krystal is home with her kids. They eat dinner on TV trays and watch movies. After the big house and the Mercedes she had in Houston, she's now earning a modest working wage and making do in a cozy and humble home.

It's heaven.

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