

Rescue from Home: Some Ins and Outs

Linda Sillitoe

AS A JOURNALIST, I HAVE LEARNED secondhand about domestic violence, child abuse, mental health, and homicide. I have interviewed experts and victims; I have read and listened. I know that the names printed in the newspaper represent real human beings; the stories are real people's experiences—and tragedies.

That awareness haunted and compelled me when I learned that one of my sisters, Janean, was in a very difficult and potentially dangerous marriage. A long telephone conversation opened a window into her secret nightmare and gave me the opportunity to transform my "basic education" into something as practical and incomplete as the directions on a survival kit. Before we hung up, I promised to be her advocate in what I knew would be a long, perilous journey. It has been, but along the way there have been many moments of illumination and blessing.

The role of "rescuer" can be played by any family member, friend, or neighbor who wants to help a troubled, disordered, or violent marriage. Just as abuse within marriage is common, the role of rescuer or would-be rescuer is also common and must be played with sensitivity. Each abusive relationship has its peculiarities, yet all have similarities as well. In relating a complicated and emotional experience, I have tried to select the observations, incidents, and suggestions that seem most concrete and practical for others.

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First let me say that I use the term rescue partly because my sister's situation required just that—physical flight, medical intervention, and legal enforcement. However, resolution is a fine substitute for the word rescue, if a solution can be found within the marriage. (Statistics show most victims of domestic violence want the marriage to continue and the abuse to stop; in an overwhelming number of cases, the abuse stops only when the marriage ends, if then.) In fact, resolution is what Janean and I discussed in many long conversations between July 1988 and Good Friday 1989. That day, with the help of parents and siblings, Janean moved with her two babies into an apartment, obtained a protective order, and began divorce proceedings. Before that Janean had struggled to keep the peace and tried many types of rescue or resolution, including marriage counseling, a community abuse program, calls to the police, and an in-hospital program for her husband. Had any of those methods provided a resolution, she would have viewed the counselor, police officer, or doctor as a rescuer.

Rescue requires an external support system but must take place internally as well. Many victims in abusive situations never manage to extricate themselves despite the emotional and physical damage they suffer because they don't have the kind of support required for a successful rescue. Janean's support system ultimately included not only the community resources I have mentioned, but also the emotional, strategic, and financial support of our parents, her seven brothers and sisters, their spouses, and several friends. Every bit of that support was needed. More important, perhaps, was the strength Janean found within herself. She had not been abused as a child; she had been raised in a loving home, had a college education, and had high expectations for her life and her children's lives. This healthy core, though eroded, supported her, too.

Internal rescue is invisible but essential, for the bonds that hold us most tightly are within us, not imposed upon us, and they are the hardest to loosen. Marital problems are notoriously frustrating for police officers, counselors, friends, families, and others because of the ambivalent feelings of the person being rescued. Our attitudes and convictions swing like pendulums when our values shift or confidence wavers. Until a victim is free internally, the external rescue can only be temporary; when a wife returns to her abusive husband (who is usually in the repentant phase of the cycle), her support system often collapses in dismay and frustration. Marriage is a complex bond woven of many experiences and emotions. Most marriages in western civilization are a matter of choice and love. It is not easy to recant that choice or let go of that love. In addition, the vulnerability, insecurity, confusion, or recklessness that initiated the match (often unconsciously) are still part of the abused person. The abuse has likely reinforced those traits.

From the beginning of this journey, my cardinal rule was to never tell Janean what to do. Not only did she have to reach her own decision and live with it, but I knew that if I voiced an opinion, I would be discredited when her inner pendulum swung the other way—which happened about every other conversation. My role, I decided, was to raise her self-esteem so she could become empowered instead of helpless. Hearing, “You matter,” nourishes anyone. At first that thought seems alien, almost sacrilegious, to the woman who is convinced that the Lord wants her to sacrifice herself for her children, husband, or eternal marriage. Janean’s healing was almost visible, even over the telephone.

Before Janean began talking, she felt increasingly alienated from the family, and we from her, because she was living in a split reality we did not comprehend. Within her secret, she felt she was an utter failure in an otherwise golden (and mythical) family. She was the sixth child to marry in the temple and possibly the most devout in commitment to church and family. Her marital problems often seemed insurmountable, but she did not see divorce as a possible solution. Not only did I remind her of her talents, accomplishments, and potential, but I also mentioned the problems the rest of us have, which seldom come up at family birthday parties. Very gradually she began to believe that not only were her children worth saving from misery, but so was she. Then she began to comprehend that the people she loved and respected would understand and support her if they knew her true situation.

Additionally, our family is indebted to Oprah Winfrey’s television program, an unexpected source of strength for Janean as she immersed herself vicariously in discussions of abuse, divorce, child support, custody, and other related topics. When I said her sisters in abusive marriages were legion, she didn’t believe me because other women were doing as well as she was in protecting their secret. As she listened to others, her shutters opened, and she recognized many of her sisters hiding behind their own drawn shades. Now she reaches out to them.

Though I am no clinician, journalism had taken me to dream-reading, too. Over the years, understanding my own dreams—especially recurring ones—has changed my direction. I introduced this idea to Janean rather tentatively, but she grasped it easily, and we experimented with interpretations of her most vivid dreams until our decoding clicked into place. During those dark months of ambivalence, fear, and torment, it helped me to know that she was dreaming of new areas of her house (or psychological space) that were bright, comfortable, and luxurious. I felt even better when her dreams featured her taking charge of terrifying situations or emerging whole from trauma.

However, as Janean gradually found and reaffirmed herself, the tensions at home rose, too, and her situation became increasingly dangerous. Now she no longer took total responsibility for everyone's behavior and emotional and physical health. She expected her husband to control his own behavior and to allow her some privacy and autonomy. She felt more compelled to stand her ground in an argument than to back down, and he found this response not only irritating but threatening. His jibes at rape crisis centers or domestic violence shelters as agencies to break up families bothered her now in ways they had not before. Television shows and even commercials or public service announcements raised issues between them. Her husband's admitted expectation that marriage is confrontative, and his oft-repeated edict that divorce is anathema "no matter how bad it gets," echoed the clang of a prison door rather than the satisfying click of eternal commitment. As her attitudes changed and his became apparent, every sentence, every incident posed a potential battleground. Avoiding, surviving, and trying to resolve fights demanded continual attention—and perpetuated the status quo on his terms. Yet gradually she began to protect her inner, growing self and focus on survival and solution without true surrender.

In the end, a rescue must always come from within. However, it is inhibited by the continual abuse, which successfully perpetuates the status quo. Within the marriage, the victim's sense of normality is so distorted, her self-esteem so damaged, and her need to appease so enormous that she is often incapable of changing her situation or even thinking of change. Therefore, even her efforts to keep the peace perpetuate the status quo. In fact, as long as she can deny she is being abused, she is, in her own mind, not a victim but a wife, loved and valued, and the world seems safer. She erects defenses by noticing another in a worse situation. "If he ever did that," she'll say, "I'd leave." The line she draws, however, shifts as soon as the violence escalates or, more likely, changes character. Awaiting the crucial incident that draws the line definitively without real tragedy can be frightening.

Naming is a key tool and a powerful one. Janean began talking when her husband was diagnosed as depressed—a legitimate illness that can be treated. The second diagnosis of a personality disorder came later; yet devastating as that was, it brought some context to chaos.

Defining abuse is essential. Name-calling, ridiculing, derision, cursing-out is not okay or typical; preventing sleep or medical treatment, reckless driving, denying physical freedom to leave the house or use the telephone is not okay; physical force, whether it leaves visible marks or not, is not okay; threatening violence or kidnapping is not

okay. Because abuse is not specifically defined in Relief Society and priesthood lessons or bishop's interviews, my brother-in-law, like many returned missionaries and priesthood holders, gave the right answers at church, never associating his behavior with abuse.

By November 1988 the need for intervention was obvious. Janean knew then that her husband had a personality disorder that was not curable or susceptible to therapy. They had two boys, ages two years and ten months, who were precocious and lively, but very prone to colds and ear infections. The children's ages and illnesses made everyday life challenging. Almost daily Janean endured verbal and psychological abuse and irrational conversations; explosive arguments occurred every few days. Despite that, both she and her husband were active in their ward and had the appearance of a typical family.

One November Sunday, she told her bishop privately that her marriage could not continue unless it improved. He did not truly understand her situation, she felt, but, as other patriarchs would later, he left the door open for her to leave—and that panicked her. Janean called me as soon as she got home. My husband and I were visiting with a friend who was a police officer, and I knew he couldn't have missed overhearing my side of the conversation, though he continued chatting with my husband. I briefly filled him in, and he responded as more than a police officer. "An abusive marriage is almost a captive situation," he said. "Abused spouses literally can't think straight until they get out of it and notice how nice it is to be treated well. They're too busy pleasing the captor." He suggested bringing Janean and the children to our home, telling her she could return in a week if she wanted to, as he had done with his sister. At the time, I silently noted that his method was probably easier for a six-foot-tall cop than it would be for me, but his logic resonated. For some time, my mother and I had discussed various ways to give Janean's marriage a rest, but I had never convinced Janean to leave for more than an hour or two, even when she felt endangered.

The next morning Janean called very early; her voice was barely audible. On Sunday, she had feared she was coming down with the children's virus. That night her husband had kept her awake, as usual, arguing, entreating, anything to keep her engaged; once he went to sleep well after midnight, the baby woke up sick. Now she was exhausted, demoralized, and ill herself.

My mother, who lived only a few doors from Janean, met me and we cheerfully packed Janean and the two children into my car, agreeing that they could rest at our house until Janean needed to go home and cook dinner. Just in case, we brought enough to see them all through a day or two. As it turned out, they stayed until Friday, went

home, relapsed, and returned for another four days. Even though Janean was very ill most of the time, her stay changed her thinking. We were too busy chasing her babies to wait on her, but she did like being treated well. She didn't miss her husband, which surprised her. The little boys acted out their accumulated stress, but they didn't cry for their father or home. In fact, when we took the two-year-old for a ride in the car, he checked to be sure we would return to our house, not his. During November and December, we continued these time-out periods, and because they were ostensibly due to illness, they incited no hard feelings or punishment at home. My parents invited Janean's husband to dinner, providing a practical and emotional support to her absences from home.

By Christmas my own family was feeling stress. Janean's family was not getting enough help from biweekly counseling sessions, and nothing else was immediately available. Although Janean and her husband called a Christmas truce, the volatile situation exploded again in January, the very night a community support group was supposed to begin, but didn't. Their tension was high in anticipation and a fight almost inevitable. This time Janean and her babies came to our home for time-out without being sick.

As tensions rose in December, I had, with Janean's blessing, begun sharing information about her situation with other siblings and their spouses. This opened the door for Janean to talk directly with them. I knew how vitally she needed support from both sisters and brothers. The men had difficulty understanding why her husband didn't shape up (he couldn't) or ship out (he wouldn't), and why Janean hadn't left long ago. They had to visualize living with a very strong roommate half again their size, whom they loved but who constantly tore them down and yet depended on them. Could they imagine being pregnant, nursing, and fleeing with two heavy babies? We all had to imagine how paralyzing physical fear is, even if suppressed; how immobilizing the great unknown is, especially when one feels inadequate and afraid.

No other family could take in Janean and her babies at a moment's notice, but they cared and would ultimately provide babysitting, legal assistance, moving services, and cash. Removing the secrecy surrounding Janean's trouble also helped ease the stress. Throughout, my husband John and I gave our children the information they needed to cope with the priority I placed on Janean's needs and with the appearances of two small and dynamic houseguests (who were happier and more relaxed with each visit). We also began to rely on trusted friends to give us emotional support. In addition, my occasional contact with police officers through my work provided an important touchstone with reality. We all learned that denial is a strong and dangerous survival

technique. The person in a demeaning or dangerous situation survives by denying the extent of the danger and suppressing many of the accompanying emotions. Because my mother lived so close to Janean, she really rode Janean's family's ups and down. My contact was less extensive, but there were times when each of us involved simply had to screen out and mentally deny awareness of that precarious situation. Every time the telephone rang, we all jumped. We began to expect crises every other day as the situation became more volatile.

As Janean continued to seek help in January, she found an inpatient program promising intensive drug and behavioral therapy, which her husband agreed to enter. He ended up staying for five weeks, and during that time Janean worked through many internal issues regarding eternal marriage, divorce, independence, and the children's well-being. She prepared to give the marriage every possible chance when he returned but also learned that she could live on her own. Two weeks after they were reunited, Janean's husband was involved in a tussle with police officers, and that incident finally drew the line definitively for Janean. On that Monday at midnight, she and her boys returned to our home for a final time-out. Feeling she could not leave the marriage with her husband's knowledge, she found an attorney and an apartment. After their last community workshop on abuse, she returned to our home for a family meeting. The next morning, she arranged for her husband's doctor to break the news and encourage her husband to check himself into the hospital, which he did briefly. Meanwhile, she went into hiding for two weeks until she felt she could move back home. From Good Friday through the first weeks of spring, the strategic support group we had built proved invaluable, providing financial, legal, practical, and moral support.

We were lucky. In a little less than a year, the crisis was resolved to the point of safety, though legal hassles extended for another year. Janean found a job and is working full-time happily and successfully, and her children are enrolled in a child care program they enjoy. She laughs now, in a carefree way we had almost forgotten, and she pursues self-knowledge with the same courage and determination that finally freed her. The rest of us sleep better. Every few months, we read in the newspapers the kind of article that haunted me, reporting a tragic incident of family violence. The quotes differ, but not much. I dreaded the neighbors describing the typical young family—a sweet, quiet wife, two cute little boys, and a husband, who, though a loner, was such a kind, helpful guy.