

Like many victims of domestic abuse, Mary Clemons escaped. And then returned—many, many times. A report on just why it can take so long to break free, and what every woman can learn from Mary's experience · By Sabrina Rubin Erdely

Mary Clemons cowered in her sister-inlaw's bedroom closet, practically afraid to breathe. She'd known her husband, Chuck (not his real name), would come looking for her sooner or later, and now he'd finally arrived. "Have you heard from her?" Mary heard Chuck demand of his sister, who feigned ignorance. In reality, Mary had been hiding out there for two days, ever since Chuck had smothered her with a pillow until she'd seen spots. Mary had fled their apartment in the middle of the night,

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I wanted the best for Amanda, and that meant a two-parent household"

leaving their sleeping 3-year-old daughter behind, vowing never to go back. She'd spent the previous couple of days figuring out what to do next.

Now, from the darkness of the closet, 22-year-old Mary listened as Chuck began to cry. "I don't know where she is," he wept to his sister. "I'm so worried." The sound of Chuck's sobbing gave Mary satisfaction—but also flooded her with sympathy. He sounded so miserable. Mary was flattered to realize how devastated Chuck was by her leaving; it was proof that he really did care. She returned home the next day.

"Yep, I went back for more," she says

drily, 20 years later. It wouldn't be the last time. Over her 15-year marriage to Chuck, Mary Clemons fled again and again, with each return plunging her into more horrifying abuse. "Let's see: I've been gagged, tied up, and beaten. Stripped naked in the woods, and chased with a car," remembers Mary, 42, her lilting voice tinged with the twang of her adopted hometown of Terrell, TX. "I've had guns pulled on me, and knives held to my

throat. The abuse got pretty wicked." And yet, despite the violence—which was so extreme that a shelter worker once warned her, "On a danger-level scale of one to 10, you're an 11"— she kept going back. Only on her eighth attempt did she finally escape for good, in 2002, at age 33.

Though it might seem inconceivable that a battered woman would keep returning to the person causing her pain, Mary's pattern is utterly typical. Studies have shown that two-thirds of battered women who leave their abusers go back within a year or two; it takes the average survivor five tries before she escapes for good. "Leaving this kind of relationship is a process, because of the huge influence the abuser has on the victim," says Veronique Valliere, Psy.D., a clinical psychologist in Fogelsville, PA, who specializes in treating abuse victims and perpetrators. "She can't just pick up and leave; the abuser makes that impossible by the control he exerts over her life." There's only

one way most women can get out of this kind of relationship, says Sheryl Cates, the former CEO of the Texas Council on Family Violence, and that's with outside help. "I would

say the vast majority of women who leave do it only with the support of family or friends," Cates asserts.

ald women who leave Mary 20

Mary, 20, with 1-yearold Amanda

One in four women is abused in her lifetime, and there are 4.8 million intimate-partner-related physical assaults and rapes reported each year, reports the National Violence Against Women Survey, sponsored by the National Institute of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That makes domestic violence the leading cause of injury to women. On average, more than three American women are killed by their partners every day, and one-third of all women murdered in the U.S. lose

their lives due to domestic abuse, say

Department of Justice statistics. And because the economic downturn has contributed to a spike in domestic violence, knowing how to be there for an abused friend (see "What You Can Do: Eight Smart Steps," opposite page) is more crucial than ever.

"The economy plays a huge role," says Sue Else, president of the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV). "When money is tight, when people are anxious about finances, when someone has been laid off, that tension can get funneled into physical abuse." A recent Mary Kay Inc. study found that after the financial markets tanked in September 2008, three out of four domestic violence shelters nationwide saw an increase in women seeking help. with 75 percent of those shelters attributing the surge to "financial issues." Cates concurs, noting that calls to Texas hotlines have jumped as much as 21 percent. However, the sad truth is that shelters have been hit hard by the economic downturn,

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too: Forty-one percent of them have had to decrease their services, reported a Mary Kay survey released last May, and 88 percent feared that their ability to provide services would stay the same or worsen over the year ahead.

This landscape is undoubtedly discouraging to victims of domestic violence trying to make their escape. And it showcases exactly why a supportive inner circle can make such a huge difference. "Without the people who helped me, I'd never have gotten out, and I'd be dead now," Mary says. She has a survivor's grit, but it's buoyed by a sunny optimism—because when she most needed help, she discovered not only a wellspring of inner strength, but also the courage and compassion of her friends. Together, these allowed her to reinvent her life.

The nightmare began, of course, as a love story. When Mary met Chuck, she was a blond and bookish 18-year-old in high school looking for direction in life—ideally, one that would take her out of her unhappy child-hood home in rural Michigan. As she was growing up with her mother and two half-brothers, Mary remembers, "our house was a roller coaster of change": Mary never knew her birth father, and was adopted twice by stepfathers, the second of whom was an abusive drug addict. Lonely and shy, Mary craved stability and sought refuge in books and at church. "I prayed to be rescued by a handsome prince, like out of a storybook," she says with a smile.

Chuck seemed to fill the bill. Six foot two, with dark hair and a gregarious manner, he was the son of Mary's pastor. He lavished her with attention, opening doors for her and thrilling her with compliments. Chuck also became jealous when he'd spot her talking to other boys. "I was still a teenager, and I thought that was a sign of love: He doesn't want anyone else to have me," remembers Mary. She quickly became smitten—and pregnant. Their daughter, Amanda, was born six months after their quickie 1987 wedding, and Mary's fairy-tale dreams quickly soured.

Chuck began making excuses for not coming home right after his equipment-repair job, sometimes staying out all night drinking. Stranded in their apartment with a wailing infant, Mary burned with resentment and hurt. "We did everything together before Amanda was born; we were best friends," she says. "But once she arrived, he basically disappeared." Not that Chuck was much fun to be around anymore: He'd needle Mary about what she'd done each day—whom she'd seen, what they'd discussed—peppering their conversation with barbs, telling her that the dinner she'd cooked was awful, calling her fat and dumb. That pattern of put-downs is an early hallmark of an abuser, says NNEDV's Sue Else. "Almost immediately, he finds ways to shatter the victim's self-esteem," continued on page 192

WHAT YOU CAN DO

smart steps

If you think a friend is in a dangerous relationship, here's how to help her and perhaps save her life:

- Let your friend know you're there for her.

 "The number one weapon abusers use is isolation," says Brian Namey of the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV). "They do not want their victims to feel supported." Fight back by saying, "I miss hanging out. How are you?" That way, she'll know she can open up to you when she's ready.
- To be more direct, say, "I'm concerned that this
 person isn't treating you the way you deserve, and
 that's not OK. Here are some options to look into
 should you feel the need," and provide ideas (see
 "Resources: Where to Turn," page 192).
- Don't judge "If you ask your friend, 'How can you be with someone like this?' or 'Why are you choosing to stay in this relationship?' it solidifies the false belief that she is the problem," Namey says.
- Don't command her to leave him—it will only alienate her. Instead, says psychologist Veronique Valliere, emphasize your concern: "Say, 'I'm really afraid for you.'" And if you think she's in immediate danger? "Say, 'You need to leave for the night. Do you have a safe place to go?' Don't say, 'You need to leave forever'; that's too drastic. But little leave-takings will give her the practice she needs to eventually flee for good."
- When she confides in you, don't demonize her abuser. She'll probably just feel compelled to defend him. Instead, keep reiterating, "You don't deserve this. No one does." Her abuser is giving her a million reasons why he hits her—remind her that there's never a good reason to be beaten.
- Offer small, concrete steps to keep her safe.
 Encourage her to keep an emergency stash
 (clothes, house and car keys, copies of important
 documents, some cash, a list of emergency contact
 numbers) in a safe place away from her home,
 like at your house or at work.
- Be part of her safety plan Get to know the situations in which she's most likely to get hurt—say, Friday nights after he's been out drinking—and check in on her then. Develop a code word she can use as a distress signal, like "my friend Lisa," suggests Valliere: "You can call and say, "Heard from Lisa lately?" Have a plan for what will happen next, says Valliere, "whether it's calling the police or sending her dad over—whatever will ease the situation."
- Be patient with her "Each time she leaves him, it
 makes her a little stronger," says Sue Else, president
 of NNEDV. "She's moving forward at her own pace,
 even though it may not be at your pace."

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says Else. "She's stupid, she's ugly, she's lucky to have him-it's almost like a brainwashing; she begins to believe it."

One night, Chuck surprised Mary by coming home early from a party. "What, the party wasn't good enough for you?" Mary asked tartly.

Chuck backhanded her across the face. "What I do is my business," he snarled.

"It was like he was talking to a dog," Mary says. He ordered her to apologize for smarting off.

Mary stared at Chuck, her cheek stinging. She was filled with shock, fear-and also overwhelming shame. Here was the man she loved, whose regard for her was so important, and now he was looking at her with contempt. Mary just wanted this ugly moment to end, to make the hurt and fear and humiliation go away. And so, although she knew she'd done nothing wrong, she apologized. It took at least an hour of groveling until she convinced Chuck she was truly sorry. "All right, I'll forgive you this time," Chuck wearily told her.

Then he led her into the bedroom for makeup sex. "I had to turn off my brain to get through it," says Mary.

In the morning, Chuck was back to his playful self-cracking jokes while they dressed for church, looking handsome as he combed his hair into a neat wave. Mary smeared foundation onto her bruised cheek and resolved to move on. After all, she rationalized, she wasn't going to leave. She still loved him and was going to stick it out-if not for her own sake, then for her child's. "I wanted the best for Amanda, and that meant a twoparent household," Mary says.

This decision may seem hard to fathom, but in fact, as NNEDV's Else points out, Mary was using a sort of emotional logic many of us can relate to. "In any relationship, we try to make things work out," observes Else. "It's only later that you may look back and say, 'I wish I'd broken up with him

sooner." So Mary kept the episode to herself. She certainly didn't want anyone to know the truth about her now: that she was the kind of woman who'd get slapped and stay. "Shame is a huge factor," says Cates, now a national expert on domestic violence. "A modern woman is supposed to be independent, and if someone does something like that to you, it's over. No one wants to be known as the woman who puts up with it."

Mary assured herself the worst was over. It wasn't: Chuck began accusing Mary of all manner of sins-lying, cheating, not serving his meals quickly enough-and his slaps turned to all-night beatings. "His favorite thing was to sit on my chest and hold a pillow over my face," Mary remembers; he'd scold her, "If you hadn't done this, I wouldn't have to punish you." Mary heard Chuck's message loud and clear. She was to blame for the violence: peace would be restored if only she'd submit to his demands. So Mary did her best. "I still loved him, and I was sure I could fix this. So I tried to be the perfect wife," she says.

Mary had high hopes for this "Project Housewife": Besides wanting to please Chuck, she was also an ambitious perfectionist, and so she followed his every order to the letter. To assuage Chuck's fears of her flirting. she avoided interacting with all men-even her brothers, whom Chuck was sure hated him. Mary ironed Chuck's jeans and oxford shirts to crisp perfection before he headed out for a night on the town; when he'd wake her upon returning, complaining that he was hungry, she'd leap out of bed. "I'd be up in the middle of the night, making biscuits from scratch," she remembers. All the while, Mary made herself as unobtrusive as possible: "I never expressed my own opinions. I only said what he expected me to say." And when the beatings rained down anyway, and the fear and pain became too great to bear, she ran from their apartment,

RESOURCES where to turn

If you or a loved one is being victimized, follow this advice

- IF YOU NEED HELP IMMEDIATELY Call 911 if abuse is happening or imminent. Otherwise, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 800-799-7233, or log on to thehotline.org. The hotline is open 24/7, 365 days a year—and all calls are anonymous and confidential. Funded by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, the hotline connects callers with local agencies (where they're available) to get them immediate support.
- IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS If, say, you need more info about the warning signs of domestic violence or the best way to reach out to someone, log on to the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV) website at nnedv.org.
- IF YOU NEED LEGAL HELP To read up on your state's domestic violence laws and how court cases are filed against perpetrators, and to see where to find a lawyer, log on to NNEDV's womenslaw.org.

TIP A woman who's being abused should make calls from a friend's phone or a pay phone, and should go online from a public computer. That way, it's harder for her abuser to track her activities. -Annie M. Daly

"The vast majority of women who leave do it only with the support of family or friends

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desperately seeking outside help.

The second time Mary left, it was for a shelter. But her terror was soon replaced by panic over her uncertain future-especially at the thought that Chuck might try to keep their daughter from her-and she went home. The third time Mary left, she spent the night at her devout in-laws' home, where, she says, her mother-in-law reminded her of her marriage vows and encouraged her to work things out. (Only later would Mary find out that Chuck was familiar with abuse; as a young boy, he had been beaten by his father, he confided to Mary. "That's what Chuck learned; that's the only way he knew how to take control," says Mary now. "That's the way I've been able to find peace and forgiveness in my heart, to picture him as a little boy.") The fourth and fifth times she left, she went to stay with her mother. While there, Mary didn't explain much, and her mom, Carol Rogers, didn't pry. Though Rogers fretted for Mary's safety, she herself was in an abusive relationship and could do only so much.

Such modeling of abuse encourages domestic violence to span generations, says psychologist Valliere. "Growing up in a household with abuse, girls in particular really internalize it," she explains. "They come to think this is what love means, this is what you need to tolerate in order to be loved."

Each time Mary returned to Chuck, her decision was confirmed as a good one, because she was rewarded not just with a temporary peace, but with the return of the man she'd fallen in love with. "We'd have this honeymoon period where he was nice to me again. I couldn't help myself; I fell for it," remembers Mary. Chuck would come straight home from work, sometimes with flowers in hand, "and we'd have family time. He'd crack us up and

laugh. Or we'd work in the yard...all the things that happen in a normal home." Most important, Chuck doted on Mary. There were date nights followed by lovemaking, with Chuck holding her all night long. "I got enough of a glimpse of a normal life to be like, Look, he can be a family man; we can do this," says Mary.

That happy-family fantasy was so strong that when the beatings began again—as they inevitably did—she didn't flee immediately. "Hope is what kept me there," Mary says. "It kept me a prisoner."

At the J&R Grocery store, 45-yearold night manager Mary Cizczion
watched as her favorite cashier, Mary
Clemons, worked the register. Cizczion noticed Mary's curious behaviors: how she ducked her head with
male customers; how she always wore
long sleeves, even in summer. And
Cizczion saw how agitated Mary
would become as her shift ended each
night, never lingering for a moment
before dashing out to Chuck's waiting
car. "She seemed so controlled, so
fearful," recalls Cizczion. "I suspected
something wasn't right."

They were subtle clues, but Cizczion's senses had been sharpened by experience. Years earlier, when one of her sisters had been in an abusive first marriage, she'd confronted the couple, saying, "I don't want him in my house!" Her strategy had backfired: For years after that, Cizczion had barely seen or spoken with her sister. "I didn't realize the last thing you should do is get in the middle of it," says Cizczion.

Urging a woman to walk out on her abuser seems like the most obvious way to help a friend. For most people, it's the knee-jerk response. But hurling an ultimatum is exactly the wrong way to react. Explains NNEDV's Else:

"The fact that people say, 'Just get out of there' implies there's no alternative but to get out. If a woman is still intent on saving the relationship, the advice will only make her feel foolish and alienate her." In addition, making a scene in front of the tormentor himself is downright dangerous. It practically ensures that he'll sever your friendship and then possibly hurt the very friend you were trying to protect, says Valliere: "That is very dangerous for the victim, because the abuser feels rage and humiliation, and he's going to make somebody pay for that."

With Mary Clemons, Cizczion was determined not to make the same mistake again. When Mary first hinted at Chuck's violence, Cizczion expressed horror at his behavior and concern for Mary's safety, but kept her comments as positive as she could. "She never judged me," remembers Mary. "She always encouraged me; she told me how smart and talented I was and that I deserved better." This was crucial validation for Mary, whose life had become an echo chamber of self-doubt.

And so as the abuse worsened, Mary confided the details. She told Cizczion of the way Chuck would sit in the grocery parking lot each night, working himself into such a fury over her supposed flirtations that on many nights he'd begin beating her the second she got into the car. Sometimes their 4-year-old daughter was even in the backseat; Chuck would instruct Amanda to lie down and go to sleep, and the child eventually trained herself to comply.

Then there was the night when Mary, stooped and limping, showed Cizczion the evidence of her latest pummeling: arms bruised black from wrist to elbow, a belly the color of a rotting plum. Mary explained that Chuck had tied her hands behind →

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her back and punched her in the stomach for three hours. Afterward, Mary had crawled to the bathroom and vomited blood.

"He could've killed you!" Cizczion exclaimed. Mary knew her friend was right. And when, one month later, another fight began brewing in the Clemons household, Cizczion's words reverberated in Mary's head and prompted her to run across the street and call her grandfather to pick her up. It was the sixth time she left.

Mary stayed away with Amanda for six months, living with relatives. But while her life was free from abuse, it wasn't peaceful. Chuck was a constant: badgering her, surprising her when she least expected it, and—

> new laws, new help

The government is recognizing the increase in and urgency of the domestic violence issue: In March 2009, President Obama and his Administration launched the Council on Women and Girls to help American females manage their challengesparticularly domestic violence. The council recently launched 15 new initiatives to help decrease this abuse. Specifically, it's encouraging local communities to develop pro bono legal services, which means victims will have an easier time getting legal aid without fees; it's informing community professionals about how to work with children who've been exposed to domestic violence; and it is empowering authorities and publicly-funded landlords to evict perpetrators of abuse. To learn more about the council, go to whitehouse.gov /administration/eop/cwg. -AMD perhaps worst of all—threatening to fight her for custody of Amanda. At the same time, he was trying to woo Mary back by asking her out on dates and by renovating their home exactly the way she'd wanted, even hanging up her cherished family photos. "I got a glimpse of the person I married: the romance, the hugs and sweet things," says Mary.

By displaying his "good husband" side, Chuck was engaging in textbook abuser behavior. "After the victim leaves, the abuser makes all the promises and apologies she's been waiting to hear," says Valliere. "'I finally realize how much you mean to me'; 'I'm going to change.' She's always wanted to believe that—deep down inside—he's a good person, so it's such a relief. It's what her heart and soul have been starving for."

Meanwhile, Mary's family members never complained about hosting her, but they were clearly on edge—especially when Chuck would call to accuse them of breaking up his home. As time passed, Mary felt like a burden on her relatives. In despair, she went to a shelter to explore her options and was dismayed to learn it would only be able to house her for 30 days. This is typical of shelters in resource-starved regions, say experts. "Then what?" she asked the counselor, who had no reply. Mary couldn't see a way out.

"Here I had a minimum-wage job and no life," Mary remembers. "And then here's my husband, with our beautifully remodeled house and all the things from the life we had built, and he's saying, 'You can have all this if you come back.' So what kind of choice is that?" Experts agree that economics is among the top reasons abuse survivors have trouble getting away. "Especially if the victim has children, she has to figure out how to care for them, how to put food on the table," says NNEDV's Else. "She may escape and go to a safe environment for a period of time, but she has to make it on her own at some point."

As Mary meekly called Chuck to say she was moving back in—feeling "scared to death, sick to my stomach, frightened out of my mind, and hopeful that things were going to change"—she made note of a valuable lesson she'd learned: Her next escape would require more preparation.

The seventh time Mary left, it was so perfectly orchestrated and involved so much help from friends, it seemed impossible she'd ever go back. It was now 1997, four years later. Things had been fairly calm at home for a stretch, especially after Mary had quit the grocery to work as a bank teller: Not only was the pay better, but the move had pacified Chuck, who wanted Mary as far from her confidante Mary Cizczion as possible. But Mary found herself under tighter control than ever. For example, though she now had her own car. Chuck required her to be home within minutes of the bank's closing. Racing home each day with barely enough time to pick up Amanda, she tried desperately to appease him. Nevertheless, the savage violence started anew.

Mary's fellow tellers had gradually noticed the fearful way she talked about Chuck. "She did a good job of covering up her bruises," remembers manager Terri Kelly. "But I have a sixth sense for those kinds of thingsmy mother had a couple of bad marriages, and my sister and I were abused by her second husband." Kelly was alarmed at the level of violence Mary eventually confided: that Chuck had run her car off the road; that Chuck had shot a raccoon in a tree, then warned Mary he'd do the very same thing to her. "If he's threatening you like that, you need to do whatever you can to stay safe," she urged her coworker.

Mary had come to trust Kelly, and took her words to heart. And, mindful

of her last escape attempt, she started planning. She began putting aside a little portion of her earnings to build up a nest egg. When Mary was told she would be laid off, she realized her severance payment would provide a financial cushion. At home, under the guise of spring cleaning, she rearranged her closets to make the few possessions she'd take with her (clothes, medical records, some photos) readily accessible. All the pieces were falling into place. What she needed now was a push.

That prompting came when one day a fellow teller got fed up listening to Mary tell yet another tale of woe and said, "Enough already! We're willing to help you, but you have to be willing to help yourself." Mary was offended—but also inspired. "I was finally ready to hear it," she says.

Mary told Kelly she wanted out,

her parents get back together. Mary had allowed Chuck to have access to their daughter—on the advice of her new divorce attorney, she says. But after each visit with her father, the third grader would return to Mary parroting the tender things her daddy had told her: that he was brokenhearted, that he loved Mary more than he could say, that Mary was breaking up their family. "Amanda was my heart. To see her so upset with me was too much," remembers Mary. "I let it get to me. I let him get to me."

Why would an abuser be so intent on winning back his victim? The answer, says Valliere, hearkens back to the same reason a man abuses in the first place: The abuser has a faulty belief system in which he feels he's entitled to own and possess his partner, and he uses control and power strategies to fulfill that belief system. Internet access; Mary was forbidden even to read Christian romance novels, which Chuck said filled her head with impure thoughts. She spent her days cleaning their already spotless home and playing gospel hymns on the piano. "That-that was a very hard time," says Mary, her voice straining to remain upbeat while remembering the darkest period of her life. "To be home all day and have nobody to talk to and nothing to do just drove me freaking crazy. I would get out my sheet music and play for hours and hours. That saved me from suicide, probably."

As hopeless as Mary might have seemed, somewhere deep down inside she was still plotting her getaway: When Chuck mentioned wanting to start his own business,

"When I went back to him, I was so embarrassed that friends had helped me, and for nothing

and Kelly leaped into action. A friend who was selling her home was contacted, and she agreed to let Mary and 8-year-old Amanda stay in the vacant house for minimal rent. Then, in the middle of a workday, Kelly and her husband loaded up a few of Mary's belongings and drove her to her new home. When, on her next workday, Mary strode into the bankfor one of her last days on the jobshe was all smiles. And she was bowled over when her coworkers handed her an envelope stuffed with \$300 they'd collected toward paying a divorce lawyer. "I was stunned that people cared enough to help me, because I didn't feel like I was worthy," she recalls.

"And then, about a month later, I went back to him," she says in a hollow voice.

This time, her mind had been changed by something she hadn't expected: Amanda's insistence that "Losing the victim is the ultimate example of losing control. The abuser needs to regain that sense of being powerful, and to do that, he needs to get her back," says Valliere.

Word spread fast among Mary's would-be heroes at the bank. When, not long afterward, Mary ran into them, she could read the stony disappointment in their faces. She especially couldn't bear to be around Kelly, even though Kelly took pains to act neutral. "I was so embarrassed that friends had helped me, and for nothing," Mary says. "I had let them down." Mary was actually grateful to have been laid off; she never wanted to see those people again.

For the next five years, Mary was a prisoner in her own home. She wasn't allowed to find a new job. She needed permission to leave the house—Chuck kept her car keys—and was kept on a tight allowance. The blinds were kept closed. They didn't have cable TV or

Mary convinced him to let her read up on office management, and taught herself how to type—all the while thinking of the job skills she'd one day need when she finally got away. (In an act of private defiance, she practiced typing by writing Christian romance novels.)

She fantasized about escape, egged on by Amanda, now in eighth grade and Mary's only link to the outside world. Despite her ability to fall asleep on demand, Amanda had come to realize how very sheltered and violent her family life was. She would beg Mary, "Mom, we need to go!" "Once she told me that one way or another, she was going to get out of the houseand I was afraid she was either going to commit suicide or run away," remembers Mary. Amanda's pleas took on a new urgency when Chuck's violence took a ferocious turn, including a night in April 2002 when he held a loaded shotgun to Mary's temple →

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and clicked off the safety. "He said he was going to kill me and then himself," Mary says. "That's when I knew we were going to be one of those families you see on the six o'clock news."

And yet it still took one final beating to persuade Mary to leave. Mary and Amanda were driving back from a weeknight church service when Amanda asked if they could stop for ice cream; they pulled into a drivethrough for a cone, which made them 20 minutes late getting home. Chuck had gone out looking for them, and when he returned home, fully aware of this infraction and furious, he ordered Amanda-who was sobbing and apologizing to her mom-to go to her room and turn on the TV. Then, for seven hours, Chuck strangled and smothered Mary, telling her, "I'm going to do this until you pass out. Then I'm going to take you out to the forest, and no one will ever know [what happened]." Finally, toward dawn, as the pair struggled on the bed, they fell in a heap onto the floor, and a burst of searing pain shot up Mary's back; she could barely move. She was in such agony that Chuck had to lift her back onto the bed for their ritual makeup sex. Even then, he ordered her to get on top.

"The level of violence he reached that night was like nothing I'd ever experienced," says Mary. "I didn't know what he was capable of doing beyond that, and I didn't want to find out." The next morning Mary intentionally let Amanda oversleep and miss her bus. Then she asked Chuck for permission to drive Amanda to school, which he granted. As soon as he left for work, Mary shuffled into her daughter's room, bent double from the pain, her face covered with scratches. "We need to go," she told her daughter.

Amanda looked at her mother, eyes wide. "Let's go," she said, leaping out of bed. They stuffed some clothing into two of Amanda's backpacks, then drove to a shelter for battered women and waited in the parking lot for it to open.

Mary never went back-and that was largely because her support network, held at bay for so long, rushed in to help her through the next grueling months. The calls Mary made from the shelter were some of the hardest she had ever made: one to her mother, one to Cizczion, and one to Kelly, telling each what had happened. "I was telling myself, They told you so," says Mary. But her friends expressed only sympathy and support, reassuring Mary that she'd done the right thing and eventually promising to testify at Chuck's trial-because, after an investigation by the Michigan State Police, Chuck was charged with attempted murder.

"If ever there was a textbook domestic violence case, it was Mary's," says State Trooper Scott Ernstes, who, after being assigned to Mary's case, became a crucial link in her support network. In a bizarre twist, the police had initially been called in at Chuck's behest; he had falsely reported that Mary had abused Amanda. "We see that a lot: 'I'm gonna call the police before you do, so they believe me and don't believe you,' " says Ernstes, who guided Mary through the legal process.

When finally it came time for Mary to testify at Chuck's preliminary hearing, Ernstes-along with a domestic violence advocate-sat with her in the courtroom. "Testifying was horrible and terrifying, with the attorney grilling me, and my husband and his family staring me down. I was nearly paralyzed with fear thinking about what Chuck might try to do to me later," remembers Mary. "I wouldn't have gotten through it if it wasn't for Scott. I can hardly explain how much he helped to save my life." In addition to standing by in the courtroom, Ernstes escorted Mary to and from the courthouse, walking her through the parking lot when she was in her most shaken and fearful state. "He would call us at the shelter and then at my apartment just about every time he went on duty, just to check on us," Mary recalls. "It was only much later that I realized just how far beyond the call of duty he went to watch over me and my child, and I am so very grateful for that."

On the eve of the trial in late 2002, the prosecutor contacted Mary. Chuck's attorney had requested a plea bargain; did she want to go to trial or accept Chuck's receiving a reduced sentence? Knowing that her daughter, Amanda, was expected to take the stand during the trial and wanting to spare her that brutal experience, Mary accepted the offer. Chuck pleaded guilty to aggravated domestic violence, a misdemeanor versus the felony he had been charged with. His sentence of one year of probation was a huge disappointment to Mary, though she did feel somewhat vindicated to hear him publicly admit that he was guilty.

When Mary picked her daughter up from school that day and told her she didn't need to testify, she says, "Amanda broke down sobbing with relief in the car. I knew I had made the right decision. My child was more important."

At 42, Mary Clemons is enjoying her new life, with help from her friends. Once her divorce was granted—with her getting full custody of Amanda—she got as far away from Michigan as she could, moving to Terrell, TX, where she had old friends from high school and relatives. She embarked on a new career as an office manager for an insurance company, aided by the know-how she'd gained during her years in captivity.

But she also wanted to help other domestic violence survivors—to be a friend to women in need, just as others had been there for her. So in 2005, she cofounded a women's advocacy center called Healing Hearts Ministry, which has to date provided food, shelter, and counseling referrals as well as other services to more than 600 victims of domestic violence. "I owe so much to the people in my life who helped get me out, and now I have a chance to do that for other people, to use my experience to prevent other people from going through what I did," says Mary.

Not that Mary herself is fully healed. Years of counseling have helped control her post-traumatic stress disorder, but scars remain. She is leery of relationships. When she became pregnant during a rebound relationship, she kept the baby but jilted her boyfriend at the altar. "I'm the runaway bride," she says with an uncertain laugh. Then, more seriously: "Any little conflict in a relationship becomes a big freak-out for me; I have to get to a point where I can be more trusting."

And everyday moments can bring on terrible flashbacks. Recently, her 6-year-old son and Amanda, now 23 (who lives nearby and is working as a fashion designer), got into a pillow fight, and the sounds of their swatting and shrieking sent Mary into a rage. "Hearing them saying, 'Stop, stop'—well, it makes my hair stand up even thinking about it. Now we have a new rule: No pillow fights till Mommy can handle it."

And then there's the recurring nightmare: Mary dreams she's in her old house and that Chuck is holding her hostage and beating her—yet she knows that just beyond her front door are her friends, her family, and her new beautiful life, beckoning. "It's terrifying," she says. "Because I can see that life, but I can't escape, I can't get to it."

In the dream, Mary remains trapped in the horror of knowing that freedom is so close but unattainable. But it always ends the same way: She wakes up and realizes, with relief and amazement, that she's made it out after all. ■

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