

Hitting the Trail: The Steep Climb Up from Domestic Violence

By Gail Wanman Holstein

I wrote a novel about a family group that shucks off civilization and goes to live in an ancient cliff dwelling in Arizona. It seemed like a fun concept. Don't we all sometimes dream of a simpler life? Doesn't the past look good through a long lens?

My story's wife and mother, Leah Ellis, isn't wild about the project. Her husband is enamored with the past, not she. Their son thinks the idea is cool; their daughter is too young to have an opinion. Leah's best friend signs on, along with the group's leader, a renegade archaeologist who holds strange sway over them all.

For years I had been an advocate for victims of domestic violence—not happy work. I was ready to write a lightweight adventure novel. Only after reviews characterized the book as “disturbing” did I realize I'd brought my work with me. I had written a metaphor for the difficult journey that abused women must make to be free.

In my story, Leah worries as her husband becomes withdrawn from society. He has already moved his family from its native Philadelphia to Arizona, so he can be near the “ancients.” Leah has had to leave her familiar surroundings and people she loves.

Isolation is a weapon in the abuser's arsenal. Keeping his victim separated from people she knows will make her dependent on him and gives him the upper hand.

Leah adores her husband; sex is good; she knows he loves her, even though their life is weird sometimes.

Abused women may love their men no matter what. Besides, they are conditioned to stick it out. Love, or the memory of it, can allow abuse to continue for years.

Leah feels she has no right to complain. Her husband doesn't hurt her, he requires nothing of her except to be available to visit the ruins with him, and they're well off financially. His passion for the ancients defines their life. Leah puts aside her own interests to be supportive of his.

Victims of abuse often relinquish their interests voluntarily. I've often seen that their core belief, their attitude toward themselves since birth, is that they are unimportant. Their abusers—who were “really nice guys” when they met—bring excitement to their lives. They make the decisions, have the responsibility, and take over in general. The women are relieved of having to create any part of their life together. They may view this as positive.

I also see a parallel between his obsession and the overuse of drugs or alcohol in sick relationships. Unless these addictions are overcome, it's almost impossible to address the underlying issues.

Now Leah's husband takes them on a camping trip that is too strenuous and austere. He says they should learn to live without comforts because the ancients did. Only he knows the way back. When he finally gets them home a day, Leah is livid. She won't go near him for days.

This part of the story parallels the “storm clouds gathering” phase so familiar to victims of domestic violence. The abuser may threaten, blame, give orders, drink too much, be possessive or jealous, or throw tantrums. Both members of the couple may argue and be confrontational.

At this point the abuser may resort to pushing or perhaps give a short slap—which usually puts an end to the argument. Later he may characterize the incident as a “fight.” Often, in fact, he believes he has done a good thing by stopping the “fight.”

In reality, what he has done is to reassert his dominance. He has given her fair warning of what will happen if she dares cross him again.

Leah, driven by loneliness, vows to stuff her anger. Her husband apologizes, and they make love. Everything's fine again. Leah's best friend comes to visit, bringing cheer and good memories. Once again Leah feels—hopes—that she can make this new life work for them.

This is the “honeymoon” stage. He is contrite for his behavior and afraid he's pushed her too far. This would be an opportune time for the woman to demand some changes. She could use his remorse to lay down rules and extract promises.

Unfortunately, it's a rare woman who “gets” the lesson the first time. Shelter intake statistics show an average of seven incidents before a woman takes action. The pattern may repeat over days, weeks, or years, with long or short intervals between “storm clouds gathering” and “honeymoon.”

With the collusion of his mentor the archaeologist, the husband tricks Leah, her friend, and the children into another “camping trip” to the uplands of Arizona. This foray turns out to be the really big move, into an abandoned ruin. Here they are expected to create a new society modeled on the presumed lives of the ancients.

Often there is a single incident that finally pushes the woman over the edge. The flare-up may bring the police, involve the children, put her in the hospital, or send him to jail. Whatever the trigger, she decides to get out.

Leah quells her outrage, gets her bearings in the woods, and starts to plan. She'll walk and search in a different direction every day. She tells nobody what she's up to. She also finds a hidden cave, and in it she uncover some ancient pottery and a fetish. She doesn't understand these items, but she chooses to believe the ancients are sending her a message. She begins to follow her instincts.

It takes enormous courage for a woman to seek help and take charge of her future. She may call a friend, a hotline, or the cops. Yellow pages, the internet, a shelter—all are sources of information.

Now she must be careful. She may have found a domestic violence counselor to help her think through her options. Where can she go? What resources does she have? What protection does she need?

Only she can assess what her perpetrator will do if he gets wind of her plans. Will he let her go, or come after her? Will he threaten her legally (seeking custody of the children, breaking her financially) or physically?

Leah also continues trying to persuade her husband to take them out of the wilderness. But despite a growing rivalry with the archaeologist, the two men are united in their determination to stick with the new society. Leah is on her own.

Even while planning their escape, battered women often hope their abuser will change. It's hard to believe a woman would agree to live or sleep with a man who has mistreated her repeatedly. But when women face the prospect of losing their home, their income, or their children, they may have to make an unacceptable choice. If they do stay with the abuser, it may be in their emotional best interest to hope he will change.

Leah finally discovers a way to a section of the woods from which she could escape. But the archaeologist has tracked her there and leaves an unmistakable message: come back, or never see your children again. Defeated, she returns. The group moves to a camp deeper in the woods from which escape looks impossible.

It is rare that an abuser will stop at one or two incidents. He is losing control and frantic to maintain it. This is the stage in which an abuser may harm a pet, beat his wife or children, or do serious damage to property. If he has been violent before, the chances are he will be violent again. If he has threatened to kill her, she had better take his word for it. She must get out of there—now.

Leah, desperate, makes the excruciating choice. She grabs her son and heads out, knowing they will be stalked, and that things will go badly if they are caught. Leah calls upon the wisdom of the ancients. Now she trusts her instincts. She has lost much, and she may lose more, but this is her only hope.

Choices for battered women are often very tough. Leave, and lose financial support, property, custody. Stay, and risk losing all that, and maybe your life as well.

Fear, despair, and hope are powerful. They can pronounce life sentences on women who lack the will or resources to escape. Sadly, many who remain will see further violence. Lives are ruined and families are shattered.

Without giving away too much of the story, I can tell you that Leah and her son find strengths they never dreamed of and resources they've never called upon before. They make

painful decisions that they can never tell a soul, and that they'll live with for the rest of their lives. But they come out of the woods alive.

Women who escape rarely find a smooth road. They may be depressed, disillusioned, ground down by poverty, deprived of children or property. It may be agonizing to face friends and colleagues. If they are raising their children alone, someday they'll confront the children's questions about their fathers. They may be tied up in legal wrangling for years. They may have to move far away, change their names, and live in secret.

But every day they can say, "I am alive."

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