

Finally Free

by Karen Hardin

By all appearances those that drove by the beautiful estate might have noted the Mercedes convertible, well-manicured lawn and the nanny in the front yard with the young children and assumed the Kostyal's had everything. They would have been almost right. They had everything but one of the most essential ingredients for a happy family...peace. Jennifer Kostyal had rarely known peace.

With surreal calm, she made her way to the children's playroom.

"I love you baby," she whispered as she set a coloring sheet and crayons in front of two-year old David. Next, turning to eight-month-old Rebekah, Jennifer strapped her into the battery-operated swing and flipped on the television. She paused before walking out of the room to look at them one last time. Then, as if on automatic pilot, she turned and made her way down the hall for the gun. She was determined to put an end to the hallucinations and tormenting images that constantly filled her mind. If only she could find the gun...

In her search she entered the formal living room, completely oblivious to the crystal chandeliers or the lavish surroundings put together by finest designers of the city. Instead her eyes rested on a recent portrait which hung over the sofa. A combination of rage and depression exploded from inside.

"It's a lie!" the former beauty queen screamed as she crumpled into a heap on the floor. The portrait of her and the children mocked her from its high perch. It conveyed that of a happy, doting mother. In reality, the photographer had doctored the finished product before delivery to eliminate the depth of sadness that radiated from Jennifer's eyes in the actual photograph. The portrait, like her life, was all a lie.

Jennifer Kostyal hadn't always known wealth but was quite familiar with sadness. She had grown up on a farm on a dirt road called "Mud" in Bolivia, NC. While most children were busy learning their ABC's, five year-old Jenny was learning to keep secrets. Innocence was lost early in her young life. The molestations began at the tender age of seven and would continue for ten long years. Her molester had married into the family creating easy accessibility. He threatened to kill her if she told anyone. He needn't have worried. Nobody would have listened anyway. It was just one more secret in a house of many.

The secrecy began generations earlier when Jennifer's great-grandfather founded a religious organization in North Carolina. It was a story told with great pride at family gatherings. Jennifer also tried to take pride in the system that would one day steal her entire biological family and almost take her life when she discovered she could no longer play their religious games.

The participants followed a long list of rules and "theological" instruction necessary to obtain eternal life. It included what clothes were acceptable to wear, how to wear their hair, who they could marry, and a long list of "forbiddens" such as make-up, movies, vacation spots, games, etc. Accepting the lifestyle came with another condition,--that of complete secrecy. No one was allowed to share the belief system with new converts until they were definitely "in" since the theological ideas were so far removed from mainline Christianity. As a child, Jennifer spent hours having her young mind trained in the ways of the "secret organization". It wasn't a large group, but they were instructed that they were the only ones that would ever obtain the elusive eternal life. To leave was unthinkable and costly, something she would discover as an adult.

Her sister, ten years her senior, began dating a "preacher's kid" in the community. Almost immediately he left his faith to join the organization. The two married and moved not far from the family farm. As her parents became more and more involved in the religious gatherings, Jennifer was often sent to her sister's home to stay. From the beginning, her new brother-in-law, "Joe" was attentive and caring. But no one knew the trauma Jenny experienced after all were asleep when she would hear the floor creak in the small single wide trailer and knew he was coming again.

Joe often took Jennifer places--just the two of them. No one seemed to notice. Or maybe they just chose not to. It wasn't until she was nine that he crossed the line when he took her swimming at a nearby pond. Taking off her swimsuit and into water over her head, he continued through her screams, "It hurts! Please stop!" she cried finally breaking through his consciousness as the act was completed.

"Oh my God!" Joe stammered as if jerked back to reality and stared at the frightened frail girl in front of him. In one quick move, he picked Jennifer up and threw her into the water as one might discard an empty can. He then made his way to the top of the hill where he had left the car. However, this little child could not be discarded that easily. God had a plan for young Jenny's life and a call on her life to tell the world that Jesus can make one whole no matter what you have experienced.

What happened next, can be only be described as a miracle.

Feeling as if she was suspended in the water on her back, she saw Jesus walk across the water to her. He scooped her up in his strong arms and carried her to safety. Laying her gently on the ground, he put a finger to her lips to calm the sobs.

"Shhh... You're going to be all right," He whispered.

The next thing Jennifer remembers is walking up to the top of the hill to where her brother-in-law still sat in the car.

"Want to hold the wheel while we go home?" Joe asked as if nothing had happened...hoping that the offer would erase what had just transpired and keep him out of trouble. In spite of his fears, Joe couldn't stay away from Jennifer. And Jennifer couldn't get away from him until she was finally old enough to avoid the unpleasant family visits.

By fifteen or sixteen, Jennifer had blossomed both mentally and physically. Now a slender beautiful blond, she received lots of attention and invitations which provided the perfect opportunity to stay away from her sister's home...and Joe. At other times she remained late at school studying as she realized that an education was her ticket out of her present life.

That's all Jennifer wanted was to escape the constant abuse. What the pretty teen didn't realize is that she now carried it with her in whatever she did and wherever she went as layer after layer of rejection and pain covered her life. Jennifer thought she hid her scars well. But they were obvious to anyone really paying attention. Thankfully someone was.

Her hard work and determination prevailed after she won a local beauty contest gaining her a scholarship to UNC-Chapel Hill. It was the breakthrough that Jennifer had desperately sought. It was at UNC where she met Vicky.

"I've met a white girl that is suicidal and really messed up," Vicky spoke into the phone. "Can I bring her to Bible Study?" she asked spiritual mentor, Elder Velma Belon. Velma and her husband, Rev. Roy Belon led a Bible study targeting the students of the Triangle Area of North Carolina.

"Honey, it doesn't matter what color she is," Velma replied. "God is not a respecter of persons."

That night Jennifer found herself the only white person in a group of several African-American students. Although she had no idea what she was doing there she was desperate for peace of mind. From that first night the group and especially the Belon's took Jennifer under their wings as if she were their own. Eventually Jennifer moved in with the couple who preached to her, loved her and took her to numerous small black churches in the community. It was in those churches that she discovered when the drums began to beat and the choir began to sing, that the tormenting thoughts would subside and Jennifer would experience peace.

Not long after, she accepted Christ into her life and true peace. While her new friends rejoiced, her life-changing decision was met with disdain by her family who mocked at the idea of such an easy salvation.

The next semester brought a devastating change for Jennifer when she was forced to leave the university due to a family financial setback. Immediately she found herself thrust back into her family's perverted religious system. Only now she couldn't seem to fit into the expected mold. Yet instead of running to God she ran to alcohol and men to sedate the deep hurt. During these trying years the Belon's never lost communication with Jennifer, praying for her return. But this only intensified her inner struggle, now torn between loyalty to her family and the unconditional love from the Belon's and free gift of salvation.

In the midst of her struggle, Jennifer married, Dave Kostyal, a wealthy land owner. Two babies followed and yet the struggle within her continued. Which path would she take? It became increasingly apparent she could no longer follow the way of her parents.

As her relationship with the Belon's and their Christian faith continued, her biological family finally disowned her; walking away as if she simply didn't exist.

Even in the painful rejection, God was giving Jennifer a new start as Roy and Velma stayed by her side to pick up the broken pieces. As she lost one set of parents, God was providing her with new ones who accepted her, her husband and two young children as their own. All Jennifer still needed was a new mind and emotions.

The years of abuse Jennifer had endured were still layered upon her life. In order to maintain her sanity she had learned, like most victims of abuse, to push the pain deep into hidden recesses of her mind. It was a system that worked for many years. After she had her first child, Jennifer suffered from a bout with post-partum depression. Yet she had dealt with depression most of her life and somehow was able to push it down along with everything else into the growing quagmire of her emotions. It wasn't until the birth of Rebekah, almost two years later, that the lid to the "Pandora's Box" of rejection, secrets, threats and anger exploded out of control and Jennifer was no longer able to continue the long running façade.

Dave Kostyal returned home where Jennifer still lay on the floor of the living room weeping in front of the offensive portrait. Her next desperate words would shake his world.

"You have two options," Jennifer said amidst the tears. "Give me the 357 and I'll go in the marsh and end it all, or get me in an institute. I need help!" she finished.

Nothing her caring husband had done had seemed to help. He had spent a small fortune on counseling and tried his best to give her everything she desired from a material perspective. But none of his efforts could help free her from her tormented past.

"God, have mercy on us," Dave cried out to a God he hardly knew and was answered immediately by the God who knew all.

Instantly a peace settled over them both as his desperate cry for help was answered. That night Jennifer slept peacefully for the first time in a long time. Her journey to a sound mind and a healed heart had finally begun.

Epilogue

Now, approximately ten years later, Jennifer Kostyal is a woman set free from her past. She is an evangelist and director of Transformed by the Word ministries in Wilmington, North Carolina and the author of the book and study course, *Moving In Faith: Taking Off The Robes* (March 2006). Recent studies have revealed that approximately 80% of women have experienced abuse. Jennifer's passion is to help these women discover how, through the power of God's Word, they too can be free.

Her close relationship with the Belon's continues to this day and they are grandparents to her two children. Of the relationship Jennifer says, "What a shock it is to so many people when Rev. Belon, with great pride, introduces me as his daughter with skin as white as snow! I often tell him, 'Dad, you know I look just like Momma.'"