

# Speaking the Unspeakable

BY KRISTEN DE DEYN KIRK

*Norfolk writer  
Janine Latus  
left an abusive  
relationship.*

*Her sister  
wasn't so lucky.*

*Now Latus is  
telling their  
story—and*

*hoping to  
protect other  
women with her  
words.*

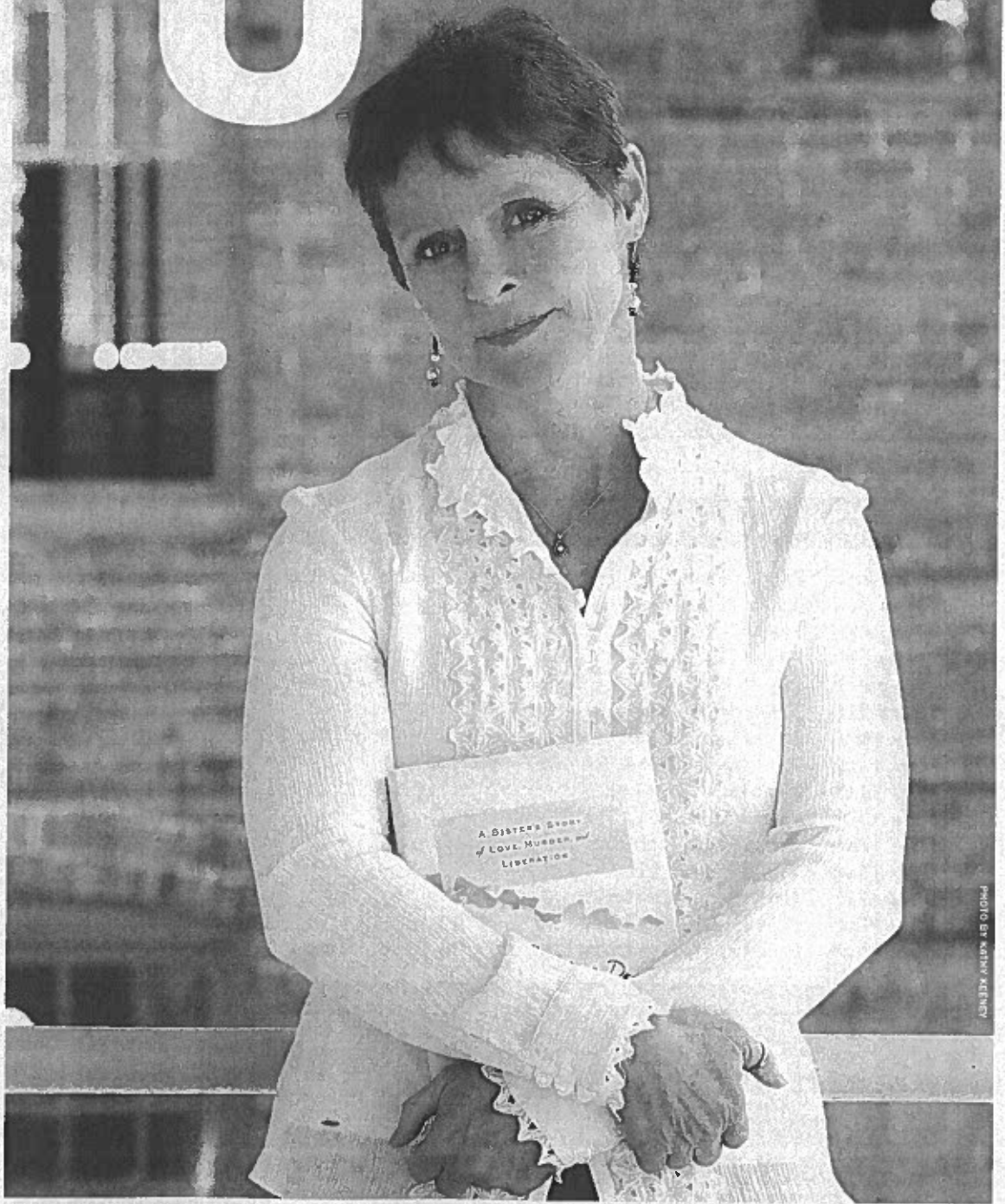


PHOTO BY KATHY KEENEY

**SCENES FROM CHILDHOOD:** Amy on her fifth birthday (top); Janine, at age 10, with Amy; the sisters celebrate Amy's wedding.

**SUN POURS INTO JANINE** Latus' two-bedroom Ghent apartment. The airy light and rising temperature make all things seem possible.

It's 10 a.m. on Tuesday, May 1, and Latus is embarking on an inaugural journey. You wouldn't know by looking at the petite woman.

She's wearing comfy-looking, three-quarter pants in a soft, dark khaki and a dusty rose, long-sleeve cotton top with a few snaps undone, just enough to let a small diamond necklace shine.

A silver band around Latus' right thumb combines with her short, short hair to add a sliver of funk to her overall casual look.

She's opening a Diet Pepsi kept cold in its can by a cozy.

Latus dropped off her 8-year-old daughter at school this morning, worked out, checked e-mail and picked up around the house (the cleaning lady is supposed to arrive at 11 and suck up the cat hair on the area rug, but that looks to be the only work she'll have).

It's a pretty normal morning, except for that journey Latus is taking.

She has one more thing to do before she'll settle into a chair on her front balcony: Water one of the handful of potted plants lining the far left corner.

"Excuse me," she says to a reporter as she rises from the chair, "I have to water that plant first or I'm going to obsess."

Latus has a degree in horticulture, so her caring for greenery isn't new.

What is, though, is the 47-year-old woman's emerging status as an internationally famous writer and activist.

**WHEN LATUS IS DONE** watering the plant, she says she's going to record the conversation, see what questions she answers well and not so well. She's been writing professionally for 15 years, with bylines in *O, The Oprah Magazine*, *Woman's Day* and *More*, and has given dozens of presentations on writing and domestic violence, the topic of her first book, *If I am Missing or Dead: A Sister's Story of Love, Murder and Liberation*, released in April.

Yet Latus is careful when she speaks with the press. It's not that she doesn't want to share her and her sister's stories of abuse; she wouldn't have written her book if that were the case. She's just worried about being sued by her ex-husband.

Publicity she has no control over concerns her. A write-up in the *Book of the Month Club* newsletter says she decided to leave her ex-husband after learning that her sister was killed.

It also says that her husband was as abusive as her sister's boyfriend.

Neither is true, Latus clarifies. She left her husband two months—to the day—before her sister, Amy, was killed in 2002. And her husband was not equally as abusive.

Latus' book starts with Amy's death and weaves back into the Latus family's history in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Latus was the classic middle child in a clan of five, and her father was a classic chauvinist.

When her mom got a job outside of the house, he reminded her that she had responsibilities at home, too.

When Latus wondered why her father kept getting her mother pregnant when it was so hard on her (she lost one baby, Latus' twin, to crib death; nearly died after giving birth to her next child; and had severe blood complications with Amy), he replied, "Men have needs."

When a neighbor molested Latus, he told her not to say anything. You'll be known as a slut, he said.

Latus had some positive relationships with men: a favorite uncle who was good at repairing bikes, a sweet boyfriend met at a family campground, but things never improved with her father, who always insisted on kissing her on the mouth and commenting on her body and clothes. When she turned 18, Latus left home and got her own apartment, even though she was still in high school. Her mom's heart was broken. Her dad showed no remorse. He wouldn't even let her do her laundry in "his" house.



About a year later, Latus was raped. She confided in only one person, the friend who found her afterwards.

With all that she'd been through at home and then struggling to provide for herself, Latus hid, both physically and emotionally. She didn't feel as important as her fellow college students. She dropped out of her school's journalism program, tired of the deadlines, and opted for horticulture instead.

Later, she met a rich young man. At Thanksgiving dinner with his family, Latus watched his father throw a turkey across the room. He was mad. His wife had forgotten the yams. Father and son retreated to the study as the mother scurried to clean up the mess and bring out the yams.

The man said he didn't like how his father got, but it turned out that he was the same way. During a ski trip, Latus commented that she wished she too had grown up taking everything around her—the skis, the restaurant, the hotel—for granted. The man responded by pinching her, slapping her, punching her and kicking her. Then, after telling her he didn't want to beat her, but she made him, he wanted to have sex.

She agreed, reasoning that sex would keep her safe. On the plane ride home, the man told people she was in a skiing accident.

Back at her job, Latus confided in a male friend, a doctor at the hospital where she worked. He eventually became her husband, and asked each morning how much she weighed when she stepped on the scale.

He convinced her to dress sexier and get breast implants.

He said others were just jealous when they stared at her short skirts and spiked heels.

He asked if she'd met any men.

He told her she'd get nothing if she left.

He hit her.

It didn't happen often, Latus says. His abuse was mostly emotional. He'd tell her she ruined Christmas when she merely saw a receipt with a name on it, a name she didn't even realize was a store name. He yelled when she came home from a business trip and went in the front door instead of the garage door, where he and the children had hung a sign welcoming her back. When she got a plum assignment from NPR, he told her it was just because the show's host wanted to have sex with her.

Her sister Amy's abuse was more physical. Married young to an alcoholic who couldn't keep a job, she took years to find the courage to leave. Once she did leave, Amy successfully took care of herself for the first time in her life, even buying her own place, only to take in another drunken, abusive man.



**COURAGE TO SPEAK:** Latus hopes her openness will encourage conversation about domestic abuse. Here, she holds a courage medal that she had given to her sister.

PHOTO BY KIMMY KENNEY

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Amy didn't talk about the details of the abuse with the second man, only the drinking.

"If you tell people the truth, they'll tell you to leave, so you can't tell them until you're ready to get out," Latus explains in *If I Am Missing*.

Once when Latus called, the man told her that Amy wasn't there, that she was chopped up in the back yard. He was joking—but foreshadowing her eventual death at his hands.


**IN AN** unsurprising move, Latus wipes her feet on a mat before stepping back into her living room from the balcony.

There's not much chance that her flip flops got dirty as she sat in a chair and talked, but just in case...

She's as meticulous with her writing: Working on her book at Elliot's Fair Grounds or on her balcony, Latus would write plot notes on three by five cards, move them around until the order felt right and then type out scenes from her life on her laptop.

Latus' article in *O, The Oprah Magazine* about Amy's death, published in October 2005, was tight and powerful; her book even more so.

Sentences and paragraphs are short and sharp, reflecting the tension in the women's lives:



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*"I also don't want to be alone. I think about it sometimes, what it would be like to date, to try to find someone who will love me. But I have flaws. Wrinkles and scars and quirks. I hate cologne. I can't hold a conversation over music. I have bad moods, a weak knee. I can't find my way around. Give me directions and I'll make it, but I won't remember how to get back.*

*Kurt knows all this, and he loves me anyway. No one else will.*

*Still, I could survive alone. I have marketable skills, a graduate degree. I supported myself all those years before we married, and I could do it again...I know how.*

*Instead I write in the morning and spend the rest of the day doing the cooking and laundry and the setting up of appointments, the carpools and the grocery shopping and the planning and prep work for birthdays and holidays and family visits.*

*And only losers are alone. It's an ugly thing to say—especially after cheerleading Amy*

A favorite line by Anais Nin came to mind as Latus remembered her decision: "And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom."

Trying to explain how she became that tight "bud" in the first place, Latus is succinct: "It was insidious," she explains.

That's how many women—maybe as many as one in three in America—end up in abusive marriages. No one's going to keep dating a man who hits you on a first date. It doesn't happen then. No one's going to schedule a second date with a guy who tells you to wear a short skirt instead of pants. The abusive behavior doesn't emerge until later in the relationship.

Latus is hopeful that things can change. Forty years ago, no one talked about abusive men. Few shelters existed. Friends and family overlooked put downs and punches between couples.

**Cross hopes that people will also see the need to talk about healthy relationships in schools. A boy who sees a man abusing a woman is about 70 percent more likely to do the same.**

*about how being alone is fine! It's great! It's liberating!—but there is nothing in me that thinks it would be okay to be alone, that I am enough alone, that being alone doesn't scream, "Nobody wants me!"*

*Also, being alone is lonely. It means relying on myself. It means no one caring whether my plane lands safely and on time or if I'm tired of my job or the president or the state of the world, or that my bunion aches.*

Latus is trying to answer the question so many people ask abused women: "Why didn't you just leave?"

Latus finally, after 14 years with her husband, sorted out her contradictory thinking when she returned from a speaking engagement at University of Missouri, where she earned a master's in journalism.

She came home, jubilant over the students' response, basking in their envy.

Her husband only said one thing: You met a man.

It was then that Latus knew that no matter what she did, no matter what she tried, her husband would always turn everything into a conversation about her loyalty.

More people are now willing to reach out and help—but still not enough. Latus wants to especially see more men speaking out, telling their friends, co-workers and acquaintances to cut it out, stop beating and stop belittling.

At first, she wasn't sure what approach to take with *If I Am Missing or Dead*. She wrote a book proposal and shared it with three writer friends. One came back with edits in the margin, another with global suggestions and another saying it needed to be completely reworked into what the book is today—the story of two sisters fighting to live a tension-free life, one losing and one winning.

Latus wants people to read the book and then do something—get out of their relationship, talk to someone they think is abused, donate their time, give money.

She refers readers to her web site ([www.IfIAmMissingorDead.com](http://www.IfIAmMissingorDead.com)) for links to organizations that can help or be helped.

Beth Cross, volunteer coordinator at H.E.R. Shelter in Portsmouth where Latus has volunteered, predicts Latus' book will help women talk about domestic violence.

"The book is relatable to me," she said.

"You get into this 'toxic mindset' in relationships. I've been in relationships where I wanted to make my partner happy no matter what. I can relate to trying to do your best and not living up to someone's expectations. The book makes it easier to talk about and not sweep the issue under the rug."

Cross hopes that people will also see the need to talk about healthy relationships in schools. A boy who sees a man abusing a woman is about 70 percent more likely to do the same. It's been hard for the H.E.R. Shelter to speak with boys and young men, though. They've had success getting into after-school programs, but not the schools.

Transitions, a shelter in Hampton, has run into the same roadblock when trying to talk to children in schools. They haven't given up, says Julia Campbell, director of development and community relations. They participate in after-school programs like H.E.R., and on June 2, they're hosting the second annual Dad's Walk with the Newport News Domestic Violence Task Force. It's just two miles, but Campbell hopes that seeing men involved in solving the problem of domestic violence will motivate others to step up.

"This is the dads' chance to get involved and be good role models," said Campbell.

**TRANSITIONS HAS** thought about contacting Latus to be involved with their programming in October, Domestic Violence Month. Such requests are piling up. Latus' schedule is jammed. She has media interviews to conduct, a book tour starting this month, and a speakers bureau to join.

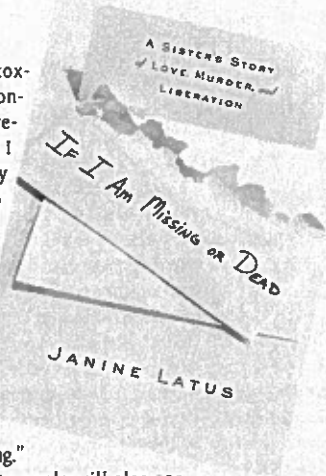
The book is being released in England, where Latus will be featured on billboards in the subway.

Latus is going to get even busier: On May 3, she made *The New York Times* Bestseller List, debuting at number 10.

On top of her career, though, she prioritizes her parenting duties.

Her daughter, whose name was changed in the book, spends the majority of her time with Latus. Every other major holiday, she sees her dad, who's now remarried.

Latus says the woman is 20 years his junior.



**GETTING IT OUT THERE:** Latus' book debuted at number 10 on *The New York Times* Bestseller List.

### LEARN MORE ABOUT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Janine Latus reads from *If I am Missing or Dead: A Sister's Story of Love, Murder and Liberation* at Prince Books on Tuesday, May 22 at 7 p.m.

Join the Transitions Dads' Walk on the Peninsula on June 2. Call Katie Annas at 722-2261 for details.

After returning home from one visit to her dad's house, Latus' daughter was sad, so Latus bought her two cats.

After another visit, Latus' ex told her their daughter would be much better behaved if Latus spanked her.

Latus gave her daughter a sheet of paper with the saying "Well-behaved women rarely make history." She asked her daughter to hold the sheet of paper and smile for the camera. She e-mailed the picture to her ex.

A copy hangs on Latus' bathroom wall, along with a Happy and Crabby comic strip. In it Happy is trying to throw starfish back in the water. Crabby tells her she can't save them all, and Happy replies joyously, "I saved that one!"

Crabby then joins in the rescue effort. ●



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