

Two decades after vanishing, her daughter suddenly showed up with children, a new identity — and speaking Spanish

Terrence McCoy

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BALTIMORE —Twenty years, 10 months and two weeks after her daughter vanished, Cynthia Haag was inside the rowhouse she refused to abandon — lest her missing child come back — when her phone started to ring. Her other daughter was on the line, saying she'd just gotten an unexpected message on Facebook.

It was from Crystal. The long-lost child.

Haag steeled herself for yet another disappointment. But when she saw the Facebook profile picture later that day in March last year, she knew immediately. Same white straight teeth. Same crinkled eyes. Same luminous smile. The daughter she'd last seen as a 14-year-old girl: now an adult.

Questions started tumbling in her mind. Why did Crystal leave? Where had she been? Why had she resurfaced? And, most basic of all, was she okay?

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Within half an hour, Haag's older daughter, Bianca Davis, was in the car, driving north to New York City, where Crystal was living north of Harlem. Late that night, after word had spread throughout the West Baltimore neighborhood, and the house had filled with people, Crystal finally appeared.

Her hair was now short. She spoke Spanish. And she was no longer Crystal Haag, who would have been 35, but had adopted the alias of Crystal Saunders, who was 44. In that moment, however, none of those changes mattered.

"Still my pretty girl," Cynthia said, hugging her.

© **Cynthia Haag**/ Crystal Haag, then age 14, shortly before she went missing on April 26, 1997 in Baltimore. Her missing daughter was finally home, but the hard part was just beginning.

'I cried every day'

About half a million children are reported missing every year, the vast majority of whom are soon found or return. For a small number, however, it can take months before they're with their families again, and for a smaller number still, it can take up to a year, possibly even two. But it's extraordinarily rare that a missing child who eventually comes back is away for as long as Crystal was. Between 2011 and 2016, only 56 children who had been gone longer than 20 years returned, [according to a report](#) by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

There's a conventional narrative to how these reunions play out — with tears and hugs and the promise of a new and happier beginning. "The fairy tale ending," is how Meaghan Good, the curator of the Charley Project, a database of the long-term missing, described it. But in many cases, experts say, the situation is significantly more complicated.

"It's not as simple as being found and restarting your life," said Robert G. Lowery Jr., an official with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children who edited the report. "There are feelings on both sides that they'll have to reconcile, but that takes a lot of time and patience and understanding."

The longer someone is gone, the more difficult that can be.

Lori Peterson, 60, of Colorado Springs, learned that a decade ago when her son, Derek, reappeared after four years. A troubled teenager who ran away from a residential treatment facility at age 16, he'd spent much of those four years homeless or living on the other side of the country, in North Carolina. Meanwhile, back in Colorado Springs, Peterson deteriorated. Convinced that Derek was dead, the family started doing DNA tests to see if it matched that of any cadavers. "I cried every day on the way to work, and then cried all the way home," she said.

Then for him to suddenly come back, after everything they'd been through, after they'd held a candle service to finally put him to rest? It was at first challenging to forgive him. And in some ways, the damage was irreversible. "It's not really a mother-son relationship," Peterson said. "I missed those years of him going from a teenager to a man, and there are things I don't know about him."

The majority of kids who go missing are like Derek — runaways. But not all who vanish have behavioral issues. Some simply disappear without their families having any indication why. Some are like Crystal.

Had she been abducted?

It was April 26, 1997, a Saturday. Cynthia was working as a cashier at a local grocery store. She wasn't making much in those days, just a few bucks per hour, but felt proud that food was always on the table and that her children had clean clothing. She was busy all the time, working and parenting, but she was making it as a single mom.

That morning, she looked up at work to see 14-year-old Crystal, her fourth child, smiling as usual. Cynthia knew her as a burst of light — "a sweet girl" who won an award in the fifth grade for always complimenting others, who liked school, and who got along with everyone, including her classmates and siblings.

Crystal got some milk and cereal, and came over to her mom. "Stay around the house today," Cynthia recalls saying, and her daughter said she would. She would not see her again for 21 years. In the first few hours after Cynthia returned home and found that Crystal was gone, she called friends, relatives, anyone who might know where Crystal was before finally contacting the police. Her mind ran through possibilities. Had she been abducted? Did she run away? She refused — then and later — to think that her daughter had died.

From then on, she looked for Crystal in the face of every brown-haired girl. One day, she was going down Baltimore Street in the back of a taxi, and thought she saw her outside one of the clubs, on the sidewalk, but by the time she ran over, the girl was gone. Another time, there she was again, on the back of a bus, pulling away, to who knew where.

"She always wore a baseball cap," Cynthia said. But that clue wasn't enough to find her. Cynthia stopped celebrating Christmas — it just seemed wrong without Crystal — and years went by, with intermittent Baltimore police reports charting the passage of time.

April 29, 1997: "Crystal Haag has not returned."

Aug. 19, 1999: "Investigation continues."

May 3, 2006: "Crystal's case is still open."

Sep. 20, 2010: "All efforts to locate [her] have been exhausted."

A new identity

Crystal remembers those years differently. She said she barely got along with her siblings. She said she sneaked out regularly. And she said she was not the happy kid her mother recalled. In fact, she was so miserable and so scared that the only plan that made sense to her was to escape.

When she was 9, she recalled, a neighbor began sexually assaulting her, and for the next few years, it happened so often that it seemed almost normal. She never told anyone about it, but when she became a teenager, she realized that there wasn't anything

normal about it. The abuse by then had gone on for so long that, she said, she'd begun to think her mother had to have known — a suspicion that solidified into belief. Her mother called it ridiculous and untrue. "What kind of mother would do that?" Cynthia said.

After getting her milk and cereal from the grocery store that spring Saturday in 1997, Crystal did not stay at home like her mother had requested. She went to hang out with friends for hours. She knew her mother, who soon would be home from work, would be mad, so she decided to stay out even longer. "And then it was 12 [a.m.], and I wasn't going back," she said.

She boarded a bus to New York, she said, and recalls walking the streets of the city as morning broke, seeing Statue of Liberty license plates. She didn't have anything with her, but remembers feeling little fear. Those first few nights, she slept outside, until she made it up to Upper Manhattan, where she introduced the world to a new person: Crystal Saunders, a 23-year-old woman, although she doesn't remember why she chose that name.

Soon she was cleaning houses and apartments, living in a heavily Dominican neighborhood, pregnant with her first child by a local man and equipped with a fake driver's license. Later she said she even acquired a Medicaid card, which for pregnant women in New York City is [relatively simple to obtain](#) without official documentation.

The new identity was easy to remember at first, she said, because she had changed only small details. The last name. The age — believable because she looked so much older than she was. As for her family? She told people she didn't have one, and often they didn't press the issue. "It's not a rare thing to not have a family," she said.

But over time, as Crystal became fluent in Spanish, birthed four children, immersed herself in the Dominican community and even adopted new relatives — people she referred to as "Grandpa," "Grandma" and "cousin" on social media — she didn't have to remember anymore. Her new identity had subsumed the old.

And so on Jan. 29, 2014, the date she actually turned 31, she posted an image on Instagram. It showed her holding a birthday cake. "Happy 40th to me!!!!!" wrote Crystal, who was by then working in the food industry.

"We have seen this before," said Lowery of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. "Some of these kids don't want to be found, and they assume new identities."

In the national records database, Nexis, Crystal Marie Saunders, now 45, is a fully realized person, with a list of New York addresses, a 2010 lien against her in the amount of \$1,282, and a felony conviction for criminal sale of a controlled substance. But for Crystal Marie Haag: nothing.

'I just want to love her'

When Crystal's oldest child, Bryan, now 20, reached his late teens, he started asking questions. Where was her family? Everyone has at least some family, he said. At first she didn't tell him what she'd been doing regularly since Facebook came into existence: furtively checking in on her family back in Baltimore.

She badly wanted to reach out to her relatives and often thought of Cynthia. But she was terrified to contact them, ashamed of what she'd put them through. Only after her son started urging her did she write to her sister, Bianca. And then it all happened so fast. Bianca was coming to get her. Crystal was walking through the door of a home she'd left 21 years ago. And Cynthia was so overjoyed to see her — even asking Crystal to sleep in her bed that night — that Crystal decided to stay.

The joy at the reunion, however, soon gave way to uncertainty, even resentment.

Crystal: "She treats me like a child . . . but I have kids myself."

Cynthia: "It's like meeting a whole new person. She leaves as a child, and comes back as a grown adult."

Crystal: "It's been very difficult, and sometimes it's easier to just stay away."

Cynthia: "I just want to love her."

But in addition to that, Cynthia had to know why her daughter had left for so long. Crystal, after equivocating for months, finally came out with it. She'd been raped continuously as a child. And she'd thought that Cynthia had known.

Cynthia said she was shocked. She said she'd had no idea that had happened, but no matter how many times she says it, Crystal said she still isn't certain it's the truth. She loves her mother — that's why she came home, why she wondered about her for so many years — but there are so many issues weighing down their relationship that it seems stuck at times.

Still, both keep trying, as months go by, 2018 turning to 2019. Crystal, who has moved her family to Baltimore, these days lives with an aunt in the same neighborhood, volunteers at a local rec center, and often sees her mother, who's on disability. They're in each other's lives, each wanting more. "I just wish we were a bit closer," said Cynthia, now 61.

But it's a start. It's also the end of something else: With her daughter back home, Cynthia will finally move out of the house that she'd refused to leave all of these years.

"Within the next year," she said. "I'm gone. It's time to go."

terrence.mccoy@washpost.com

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