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Last August, Karen finally did it.

“And he’s outside and he came up, just like a tornado, screaming in the front yard, hollering at me. “ He told her they needed to talk.

Her friend begged her not to get in his truck, but it “was a matter of getting in the truck or making a scene there.”

Karen didn’t want to embarrass her friend in front of all the neighbors. She didn’t want her friend to see how he was going to act.

They drove down to the corner where her ex-husband grabbed a fistful of her golden brown hair and smashed her head into the dash of his truck. The truck swerved and his yelling crescendoed.

“You whore! I know where you were last night!”

It didn’t matter that Karen spent the night at a girlfriend’s house, helping her get ready to move, or that she had never been unfaithful (God as her witness) in all of the years of her shattered marriage.

Her head hit again and again, the sickening *thwack!* all she could hear in her ringing ears. Black, red, then searing white lights shot through her vision — her ice-blue eyes, bloodshot and swollen. And with each collision, tears spattered the dash, her hair, her face.

She yelled back. “You know what?! I don’t have to do this anymore. I don’t have to do this!” He wouldn’t let go of her neck, wouldn’t stop bashing her head into the dashboard.

“Yes, you do! You’re gonna hear *everything* I have to say.”

“No! You need to let me go. Stop. Let me out.”

“You’re not going anywhere.”

She got a hold of the door handle but couldn’t get out. He still had her ponytail in his fist. After turning the wrong way on Bosque, he’d need to pull into the AMF Lake Air Lanes bowling alley to turn around. He’d have to use both hands to make that sharp of a turn.

The second his hand touched the steering wheel, Karen flung the door open.

She jumped. And she *ran*.

“In my relationship, [physical abuse] wasn’t all the time, every week, every day. The everyday stuff was him eating off my plate, or timing me going to the grocery store. It was more verbal and mental. Intimidating.”

They’d go out in public and he’d whisper stuff in Karen’s ear to hurt her feelings. If she’d get giggly, or get a little silly, he’d condescendingly grab her hand and pat it, murmuring, “Now, now, Karen,” as if she were a naughty child.

“I don’t know how to explain it to you. It doesn’t happen all the time. And when it’s good, it’s really good, but when it’s bad, it’s really, really bad and the in-between times, you can deal with — you know? And that’s what kind of keeps you going: the in-between times and the really good times. And absolutely the children, too, because you want your children to have their father around. By the time you realize how bad it is, you’ve lost your self-esteem, your self-worth.”



She hit the pavement on her hands and knees, but she didn’t care. “At that moment, it was either live or die. How much more is it going to hurt to land on the concrete than it is for him to keep hitting me like this? I mean, all of the abuse from my past — hitting that concrete couldn’t possibly hurt as bad.”

Karen ran through parking lot and down the street. He followed her all the way back up to Lake Air Drive. She knew he’d be forced to take either a left or a right at Lake Air, so she doubled back and hopped across a couple fences.

Her nose was still bleeding, but not broken. Her knees were scratched up; her hands were raw. She had a “headache from Hades.” She wandered around and found some large bushes over by the Heart O’ Texas Coliseum, and she hid there for a few hours, hoping her husband wouldn’t find her. It began to get dark. She checked her cell phone. A single bar blinked up at her; she didn’t know how much longer the battery would last.

Karen couldn’t go back to her friend’s house — he’d look there. All of her other friends lived in South Waco, nowhere near where she was. So she started walking. Karen made five or six calls and got five or six answering machines. She kept walking.

She made it to the Lowe’s parking lot before she reached a friend who would let her crash at his apartment for the night. The next night, she stayed at another friend’s house, then another — always moving so he wouldn’t find her. She bounced from couch to couch for a couple of weeks.

“He was drunk after the wedding. We were supposed to go out of town for our honeymoon. We were going to go to Austin, but we were going to spend the night in Temple. All we had was a checkbook and the hotel didn’t take checks. And he got mad. So we came back home. We lived in this itty-bitty house out in McGregor — it was kind of funny — and it had the pretty little glass panes all in the door.

“He passed out in the truck. Well, this is a 6-foot-3-inch man — almost 6 foot 4 inches — and a good 200 pounds. Easy. Well, what am I supposed to do with him? So I let him sleep in the truck. I went in and went to bed. Well, I locked the door. I didn’t hear him when he tried to get in. So he punched the door, broke the glass, opened the door, cut his hand and punched me in the face for ‘busting his hand open.’

“That was it. That was the very first time.”

In 1999, nine years before she left him, before she leapt from his truck last August, Karen’s (then) husband went out to Sam Rayburn Lake on a bass fishing trip. “He came home, drunk as Cooter Brown ... and didn’t say a word. Next morning, he looks over and the first thing out of his mouth is, ‘I want a divorce.’ Knocked me through the roof.”

“I don’t want a divorce!”

“I didn’t ask you what you wanted. I want a divorce.”

“But ... I don’t want a divorce ...”

“You’ve got three days and I’m leaving.”

He never said why he wanted it. Never offered any

explanation. Terrified at what he would do if she didn't, Karen went to her lawyer and filed for the divorce and cried as she signed the check for \$2,500.

"I felt like my heart had been shattered into pieces that could never be put back together again; there weren't even tweezers that could've put it back together. He was my world. Even though he did all this stuff to me, my world was my children and my husband."

The night after Karen filed for her divorce, her husband started crying, saying he didn't want divorce after all.

"It's too late. I done paid it," she said.

"You useless piece of trash!"

He took her by her throat, pinned her against the wall and screamed into her face. "I don't love you and I haven't loved you for a very long time!"

"Well, you won't have to deal with me anymore. You got what you wanted."

He dropped her onto the floor and walked down the hall, crying. "You don't understand..."

"I haven't understood for a while ... I don't understand at all."

He moved out. He'd come by the house, trying to get her to take him back and she wouldn't let him in. Slowly, Karen realized that she couldn't pay for the house and two cars on her own. She told him he'd have to help out.

He issued an ultimatum: "The only way I'm going to help you is if you let me come home."

With no other way to get financial support for her family, Karen had no choice but to let her ex-husband move back into the house. Karen let him back in under the strict rule that he would sleep in his own room while she slept in hers; it was a four-bedroom house, after all.

Then it started again: the intimidation, the beatings. But it got worse.

"I'd be asleep at night and he'd come up behind me and ... take it from me. And I couldn't stop him. I'm not as big as he is. No matter how I would try to protect myself, I couldn't. And that happened so many times."

They were "back together" for eight years — until she escaped last year. They never remarried.

Karen, a "big ole' daddy's girl," was devastated when her father passed away 15 years ago. After a nasty falling-out about what to do with her father's



- KAREN

possessions, she hadn't talked to her mother since. But she wasn't going back to her ex. No. She could never do that. After she had exhausted her friends' couches and a temporary living situation hadn't worked out, she had nowhere else to go and no one else to reach out to. She walked to her mama's house to beg her to let her stay there for a while.

Mama wouldn't believe that Karen was abused.

Karen told her mama time and time again about how he beat her with a crowbar, punched her in the face. How he ate off of her plate to "keep her from being a fat-ass," threatened to drag her behind his truck with a chain if she gained weight, or how she was timed going out to buy groceries and bludgeoned with a baseball bat if she came home "late." She told her about the black eyes, the blood, the broken bones — the broken heart.

Even Karen thought her ex was an awesome father, a great employee, a good friend. He "just sucked as a husband."

"I hate admitting this, because it's so embarrassing, but he took the bathroom door off so that he could walk in there and see what I was doing at all times. If I would get in the bathtub — and I love taking baths. I like the candles and the jazz music and the bubbles — and you know? I get to do that now! I didn't get to do that before. I like it. *I like it a lot.*"

She laughed and hugged her binder full of poetry to her chest like a child would her teddy bear. She tilted her head up, imagining the bubbles, the warm water, almost hearing strains of "You Make Me Feel So Young."

"Anyway, he would stand there with the door off and just look at me. Just stare at me. It would just unnerve me. It made me feel like —"

Her voice just hung there, and her eyes were far away, remembering, reliving.

Karen stayed at her mama's house until April of this year. Then one day, the police showed up. Mama told them that Karen tried to commit suicide. She didn't; Mama just wanted her out of the house. Mama snapped. She told Karen that no one could ever love her.

And Karen believed that.

Emotionally ravaged and homeless once again, Karen

staggered into the back of the police car. They checked her in at Providence Hospital for a psychological evaluation. After being discharged a day later, the doctors thoroughly assured of her sanity, Karen sat in the lobby, waiting, for what, she didn't know. A nurse made some calls and a man pulled up in a big white van. They arrived at the Family Abuse Center and Karen was shown to her room. Was she in jail? She didn't know where she was. She just lay in her bed, covers up to her chin, and cried, terrified.

At the Family Abuse Center, the whole of what happened to her began to sink in to Karen. Night terrors left Karen sleepless. If she got even one hour of sleep a night, she was doing well. She laid in her bunk, pressed between the mattress and the wall, the air conditioner cooling her sweat into goosebumps. Then she would feel somebody breathing on her neck.

And the fear would triple, quadruple. Karen stared at the wall, eyes transfixed on the dream catcher hanging by her bed. He couldn't get her if the dream catcher was there.

"I kept looking at the wall and I finally realized where I was, and that my dream catcher was on the wall and that I was safe. He couldn't get in here. This place is so safe, it's not even funny."

"One time, he beat me bad. We'd gone out with another couple, and I really don't know what happened. We walked out to the truck — everybody laughing — and they get in their vehicle and we get in his truck and as soon as I'd shut the door — and, I'd been drinking, but I was not drunk, 'cause I don't drink a lot. I put my head against the window and he says something and I didn't hear him, but I kind of laughed about it. Next thing I know, he nailed me in the temple with his freakin' fist and started pounding — I mean, just pounding — on my head the whole way from Cryin' Shame to where the house was over in Hewitt.

"And he's just nailing me, just punching me in the head the whole freakin' way. We get out of the truck and he goes to unlock the door and I went running in there and I grabbed the fireplace poker — and this is the only time that

I've hit this man back — and I just wailed him in the leg with it. And it embedded into his leg. And he turned around and knocked the crud out of me. I hit the floor, busting my face all up; blood was everywhere. All the way down to my knees, it was just pouring. And all I could remember was screaming, 'Look whatchyou've done to me! Look whatchyou've done to me!'

"I got up, put my keys in my purse and ran out to my car. And driving — this is the most alone I've ever felt in my whole life except when I arrived at the Family Abuse Center. Driving, just driving. I had nowhere to go. Nowhere to go. Just driving all over town, crying. I couldn't believe what had just happened.

Karen, now in her 40s, stayed at the Family Abuse Center for four months. She spent each day talking with counselors, doing a lot of self-examination and healing. She worked to find a job to get her back on her feet. By this point, her children were full-grown and living on their own, so she could just worry about herself.

Then, she had a "wow moment" with another woman at the center.

"I was laying in my bed crying and she walked over to my bed and she looked at me and she says, 'Someone asked me to speak to you on their behalf.'

"And I kinda looked at her like, *What are you talking about? I don't know anybody here. No one knows me. Who could possibly want to speak to me?*

"She said, 'Why don't you come down and talk to me?' So I got down off of the bed because I was really curious to see who could possibly want to speak to me. So we went and walked down to the other end of the room and sat on her bed.

"And she looked at me and said, 'My Father asked me to speak to you. My Father wants me to tell you that He knew you.' And she didn't know me from Adam, didn't know my situation. 'He knew you before your mother knew you. He wove you into your mother's womb. And he loves you.'

"You think I was bawling before? I was *really* bawling after that. I was like, wow. And it was so weird because at that moment, it wasn't OK, but it was a little better.

Since that day, I have become a Christian and God is

doing some awesome things in my life."

Before she knew it, Karen had been there four months and was accepted into the center's Supportive Living Program. She could live in her own apartment and still receive support from the shelter for two years.

"This is not my doing," she said. "None of this is my doing. I wouldn't be where I'm at were it not for the Family Abuse Center. Don't get me wrong; I *worked* for where I'm at. But if it weren't for the FAC standing behind me, being



so supportive, holding my hand every step of the way — if it weren't for my faith in God, I wouldn't be here."

Through the pain of owning and coming to terms with her horrific abuse, Karen has become a strong Christian. She is active at her church and has begun a crisis intervention program there for other women who need help to escape domestic violence. She has also found a new, "God-given" talent: Karen writes poetry as an outlet for her thoughts and feelings.

She is compiling her poems into a book, called Faithwalkers, dedicated to the Family Abuse Center.

Karen has made an astounding recovery. There is still much pain and psychological damage, but it is no longer debilitating and is being quickly replaced with love and support from her daughters and from the staff at the center.

"When I first got here, one of the things they had us do first was to make a poster to tell about ourselves: where we were, where we are and where we wanted to go. And I couldn't do it. Could. Not. Do it. So instead, I drew this picture of a saucer and a cup and I said, 'I want my cup to runneth over with life, love and happiness.'

"I couldn't look back because I knew where I'd been and it hurt too bad. I couldn't talk about where I was because I wasn't sure where I was. But I knew where I wanted to go.

"And, four months later, I actually got to stand in that hall and say, 'My cup runneth over!' And that's such an awesome feeling: that you can live your life.

"What more can you ask for?"



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85% OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIMS ARE WOMEN

20-24: AGE OF WOMEN WHO ARE THE MOST AT RISK FOR BECOMING VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

22 210: AVERAGE NUMBER OF REPORTED CASES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN WACO EACH MONTH

800.283.8401: PHONE NUMBER OF THE 24-HOUR HOTLINE TO GET HELP

30-60% OF PERPETRATORS ALSO ABUSE CHILDREN IN THE HOUSEHOLD

0: HOW MANY TIMES DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SHOULD BE TOLERATED.