

safe

WHEN ABUSE HITS HOME

/ STORY BY MELYSSA BROWN
/ PHOTOS BY STEPHEN GREEN

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