ABUSE, from page 8

ends meet, Richard smashed car windows and stole cigarettes and change. He convinced Brandy to panhandle. She hated it. Together, they pooled their resources and injected meth, riding the rush, pulled by addiction.

Like any couple that spends time together, the pair forged a bond of intimacy. Richard told Brandy he wanted to leave his white supremacist past behind, even as he carried a handwritten copy of "The Hávamál." In the unheated house or out on the streets, they talked of a future together, maybe one with kids. Christmas came, then New Year's passed. Happy 2009.

Not long into January, when Mr. Unheated House started acting like a pervert, Richard and Brandy shoved their clothes into their backpacks and split. With two borrowed sleeping bags they trudged to the greenbelt near the Boise River, close to where they'd first kissed. Richard guided Brandy to a spot under a bridge. They inchwormed inside their sleeping bags. The temperature dropped. Wind blew. Snow fell; by morning, three inches covered the ground.

Richard lay still in the sleeping bag. Scoot over, Brandy yelled, pushing him with her foot. "That's when he freaked out," Brandy remembers. Richard stood, caging her in his arms. She resisted. Don't touch me, she yelled. Richard grabbed her by the throat. He threw her down. Brandy slapped him. He punched her in the head.

The next night, with a low in the 20s, Richard led Brandy to a multistory garage. In a stairwell, they huddled together. He gave Brandy his coat, but it barely helped. He held her close as she shivered all night.

Then Brandy cried uncle. They needed another solution, somewhere warm. The couple ran into another guy. "And he let us stay in his motel room," Brandy says. Unlike the old guy, Mr. Motel didn't want anything, except company. But Brandy didn't intend to stay.

Back in Seattle, Brandy had been accepted into a Washington state program called GA-U, Government Assistance-Unemployable, that provided her $339 each month. She planned to use her January payment to buy bus tickets to Seattle for herself and Richard.

In Richard's mind, they were a couple – a family – and he worried she might back out of the relationship. So he agreed. He'd move to Seattle.

When the GA-U funds hit her account, the pair packed up and headed to the bus station. Once again, Brandy sat on a Greyhound, this time bound for Seattle, with a boyfriend who she realized she didn't really know. But he'd told her he'd protect her. He wanted to change his life, like she did. It seemed easier to do it together. Besides, Brandy figured, what was the worst that could happen?

Emerald City

From the moment he arrived in January 2009, Richard thought Seattle was the worst place in the world.

He followed Brandy from the Greyhound station at 811 Stewart St. on to Third Avenue. As they trudged into downtown Seattle, a city three times the size of Boise, Richard stared. Homeless people, drunk people, drugged-up people: They were everywhere. Surely someone would jump the two of them, beat the crap out of them. To Richard, it felt like a midnight walk down Crack Alley. But what really spooked him was a fear that Brandy might dump him, in a city where he didn't know a soul. "I just couldn't handle it," Richard says.

Insisting they weren't safe downtown, he prodded Brandy to find somewhere less dangerous. So Brandy and Richard walked, south to Pioneer Square, north to Belltown, then backtracked to the end of the Alaskan Way Viaduct. They tucked themselves under the off-ramp, with the traffic rattling overheard. They crashed until morning.

Over the course of a week, they wandered throughout downtown, Richard sure to keep Brandy by his side. During the day the pair visited drop-in centers; during the evening the couple searched out warm, dry spaces. Part of what vexed them was the inability to stay together as a couple, since shelters separated men and women. Then someone suggested Tent City 3.

A legally-sanctioned homeless encampment for up to 100 people, it shifted locations every few months. In January 2009, Tent City 3 was in Shoreline. The pair hopped on the 358 bus and rode north, Richard thankful the dangerous city lay behind them.

Oftentimes, area churches, honoring Christian tenets to care for the poor and the hungry, hosted Tent City 3. Brandy and Richard bused to Calvin Presbyterian Church. Set on a tract of land that hugged the corner of Northwest Richmond Beach Road and Third Avenue Northwest, the church was a sprawling house of worship. Just south of the sanctuary rose a hill, mostly flat, its crest a large square of frozen, grassy earth. A chainlink fence ran along the southern edge. From the hilltop's mesa rose a motley crew of tents, some draped with tarps, others exposed. The pair approached.

Everyone who entered or left Tent City 3 had to pass a welcome desk. Brandy and Richard asked about space. The encampment had room for couples, but it also had rules. No drinking or drugs. No violence. Everyone pitched in. A 24-hour security patrol dealt with any problems. Even with addiction issues, the couple agreed to abide, spending their first night stuffed into a one-man tent. They tried to settle in.

But Brandy couldn't really settle into her relationship with Richard because, truthfully, things had gotten a little weird. When the couple sneaked beer and malt beverages into their tent, sometimes a little argument would flare up. Was she messing around with other guys? Was he looking at other girls? Once, Richard punched her. Another time, he kicked her. Of course, she didn't show her best side when she drank or used meth. And yes, she yelled, too. But no one had ever struck her before. "It wasn't enough to make me think I should do anything about it," she says. So she kept quiet.

Sometimes when she tried to meet fellow Tent City 3 residents, Richard would interrupt, pulling her away. He told her it was to protect her. "But it started to feel isolating," Brandy recalls. The sense of isolation grew when it came to her good friend from Pocatello, Morgan Price. In January 2009, she lived in Shoreline, less than five miles from Tent City 3.

Morgan had come to the Seattle area in August 2008 seeking sobriety, and she had triumphed – until Christmas Day, when she celebrated the holidays with wine. After Brandy contacted her, Morgan sneaked beer into Tent City 3 to welcome Brandy back to Washington. Brandy unzipped the yellow tent, and Morgan entered.

When Morgan saw Richard for the first time, she thought: He is not a good character. She couldn't explain it, exactly. "I just had a really bad feeling about him," she says. She sat down. Richard was so quiet, Morgan thought that maybe he wasn't too happy she'd shown up. She was right.

Since Morgan and Brandy were old friends, old dope friends, that meant they'd do stuff together – without Richard. "And I didn't want Brandy ditching me," Richard remembers. Having Morgan hang around was a bad idea.

Whenever Morgan bought all three of them beer or meth, Richard drank and used, then sat silent. Whenever Morgan and Brandy hung out together, Richard bad-mouthed Morgan when Brandy returned. Slowly, but surely, he eased Morgan out of Brandy's life. He felt that like most of the residents of Tent City 3, Morgan couldn't be trusted.

The only thing Brandy could trust was her sense that something had shifted in the relationship. Richard's protection didn't feel like protection any longer. "What if I would have done something else and followed my first instinct and not pursued a relationship?" she remembers. Along with that instinct, Brandy had another feeling, one she couldn't ignore. She needed to address it, and the way to start was to head to the store.

The intuitive woman

Brandy and Richard strolled the aisles of Fred Meyer, a supermarket-department store, until Richard found what they needed: an early pregnancy test. He tore open a box, shook out the plastic test stick and handed the stick to Brandy. She carried it to a bathroom, where she urinated on the stick's absorbent end. Without the directions, Brandy picked up the stick too soon and, unable to read the results, shoved it into her purse. When she looked again, the results were inconclusive.

Richard stole another one. This time, Brandy followed the directions. The small test windows on the stick revealed faint symbols, but she didn't trust the results. So on Jan. 26, 2009, they trekked to Planned Parenthood.

After paying $20, Brandy provided a urine sample. The pair sat in the reception area. Neither spoke for 15 nerve-wracking minutes, but it seemed like hours. A patient educator directed Richard and Brandy into a private room.

Yes, Brandy was pregnant. About five weeks. The educator handed her a sheet of paper with an estimated due date: early October.

A baby. She was going to have a baby. Brandy felt a surge of happiness. She'd be a mother again. Skye would have brother. Or maybe a sister...

A baby? She was going to have a baby? In Tent City 3? And with a man she'd known barely six weeks? If only they could find somewhere inside, somewhere warm so –

Richard. She looked at him. Was he ... crying?

Do you want to discuss options for your pregnancy? the patient educator asked.

I'm keeping the baby, Brandy said.

Richard folded the due date paper and slid it in his wallet. Outside, Richard cried again. Finally, another chance at the family he craved. Then Brandy saw what looked like anger replace his joy.

I need a beer, Richard said.

What? she said. You're supposed to be happy.

I am happy. That's how men celebrate, he said.

Back at Tent City 3, Richard went out with a friend. He returned, a little drunk, with a few impulse buys he'd picked up at a store. Brandy derided him for the frivolous purchases, especially now. An argument broke out. The tension rose. She said they needed to save money.

Richard's fist hammered into her stomach. Brandy fell to her knees. Richard turned, unzipped the tent flap, walked out.

Brandy held her stomach. What had happened? One minute, they were yelling, the next, she was on the ground.

What should she do? She wanted to tell someone. Morgan, perhaps? But would Richard get angry? Besides, the other times he hit her, she'd never said anything.

Had she brought it on? She didn't think so. But he'd never hit her that hard before. So she cried. Alone in the tent, she cried.

Richard came back later that night. He didn't say a word. A big, silent whatever. Drunk, he plopped down next to her. She lay there, quiet, as he breathed, and she waited for sleep to come.

The next day Brandy wondered if Richard would say anything. He didn't. He acted like it hadn't even happened. She decided not to mention it either. Instead Brandy moved into an I-need-to-get-things-done mode. Drinking and meth were out, but the cigarettes? She had to quit them, too? Maybe just a couple a day. That's all.

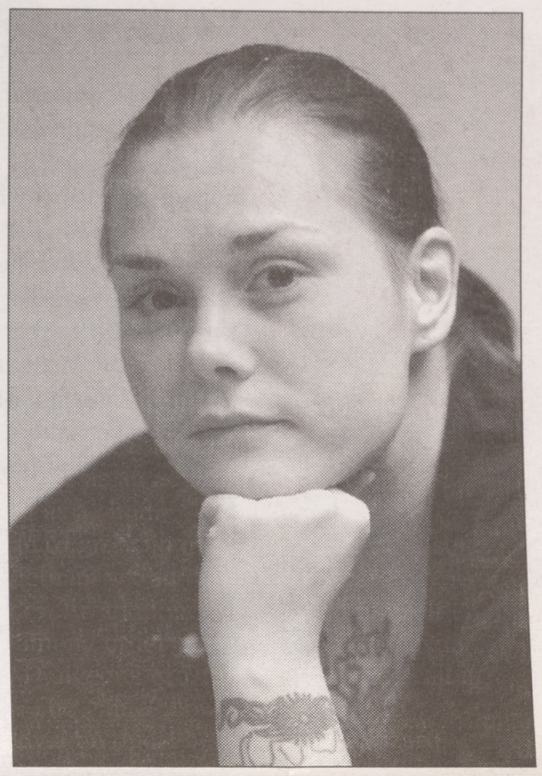
Richard, ready to provide, concentrated on finding work. He asked around Tent City 3. These two guys he knew, one promised him a job, once the recession ended. The other, who worked, invited Richard and Brandy out for a drink. His treat.

Inside the bar, Brandy had an idea on how she could drink without hurting the baby. She'd order a beer, take a sip, then pass it to Richard. Order, sip, pass, order, sip, pass.

They moved on to another bar. Order, sip, pass, order, sip, pass. On to a nightclub. It was ladies' night. Richard expected the same routine, but Brandy, sipping a cocktail, passed it to the guy who treated them. Order, sip, pass. Brandy stepped outside for a few drags. When the door swung open, Richard saw her talking to a group of women.

Once she came back, Richard was pissed. What were you doing out there? he yelled. Bar patrons watched. The bartender ordered him to leave.

Richard turned to Brandy. We're going, he said.



Brandy Sweeney

No, I'm not, Brandy said.

As drunk as he'd ever been and lost to boot, Richard somehow stumbled back to Tent City 3. He staggered to their tent, then crashed.

He awoke to a voice. Brandy. He saw her silhouette pass the length of the yellow tent. She fumbled at the zipper and entered. Richard lay still in the sleeping bag. Scoot over, Brandy yelled, pushing him with her foot. "That's when he freaked out," Brandy remembers.

Richard stood, caging her in his arms. She resisted. Don't touch me, she yelled.

Richard grabbed her by the throat. He threw her down. Brandy slapped him. He punched her in the head.

Stop! she screamed. Get off!

They wrestled. They slapped. They hit. She screamed.

Security staff and residents barged into the tent. They pulled Richard off Brandy, hauling him out. Leave now, they said.

Richard stood outside Tent City 3 and bellowed. Minutes later, a squad car pulled up. Officers subdued him, then shuttled him to a nearby hospital. Richard spent the night in detox.

The next morning, Brandy was still a little dazed but remembered the fight. And she reconsidered what she'd known for so long. The relationship, it wasn't good. She was done, even with a baby. No more. Maybe a shower would help wash away the memory.

The only showers available to residents, however, were in a nearby gym. Brandy prepared to catch a bus. As she walked across the carpet liners that covered the pathways of Tent City 3, she saw someone standing across the street: Richard. He stared. It took Brandy a moment to realize why he was there:

"He was stalking me."

Look for the second part of the series in the next Street Roots. Republished from Real Change News, Seattle, Wash.