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expressway or take White Horse Pike or Black Horse Pike, two major streets known for concrete medians, used car lots and neon-lit motels. Her father, a cop, thought the roadways spelled trouble, but Karen felt differently. The sight of them became etched in her childhood memories, the same as fireflies blinking across open fields.

After high school, Karen visited her sister in the Greenwood neighborhood of Seattle. When she ventured a few blocks west, she ran into the seedy motels and used car lots of Aurora Avenue North, a little bit of the East Coast out on the West. She vowed to move to the area, and, in 2003, she settled down in Greenwood.

She joined a local church soon after. One Sunday morning, the pastor delivered a sermon on a core biblical tenet — love thy neighbor — and challenged parishioners to extend their circle to encompass people who lived and worked on Aurora. Karen, moved by his words, stopped at motels, introducing herself to managers. She learned the stereotype of the motels, that they served as fronts for sex trafficking and rampant drug use, wasn't entirely accurate. True, she couldn't deny those things occurred there, but families lived in the motels, too, for weeks, sometimes months, on end. It was a neighborhood — not like Mister Rogers' — but one all the same. The people were her neighbors, ones she wanted to serve. And in motels reminiscent of those back East, Karen, with the green eyes and wavy ginger hair, found her calling.

She also found an internship with AmeriCorps, a community service program created by the federal government. She would weave together a network of care for her neighbors in need. By the summer of 2009, she had a routine: Two or three times a week, she'd conduct what she called a "motel tour." She'd start on Aurora Avenue North and North 95th Street, walk south down the east side of Aurora to North 80th, cross at the light, then walk up the west side, back to North 95th. She'd bring flowers to make the managers smile. If someone living in the motel needed help, she'd do what she could. One round-trip tour might take hours.

Karen set off on one of her tours in mid-August 2009. Walking past North 88th Street, she turned into the parking lot of the Georgian Motel. As she left the front office, a woman caught her eye. A pregnant woman. Karen knew she'd seen her before. But where?

Hey, I know you, she said.

Brandy stopped.

You had that green handbag I liked, remember? I met you at the food bank?

Yes, the woman who'd found the diapers. They introduced themselves, chatting. Karen asked what Brandy needed. More diapers, Brandy said, maybe some baby clothes.

As Karen walked away, she realized she wanted to do something more for Brandy. But what? She mulled it over for a couple days before it came to her: a baby shower.

She emailed a church group about her idea. "Is this something that you would be interested in doing?" A group spokesperson replied, "Yes."

As August wound down, an email thread lengthened, with neighbors suggesting ideas for the shower. "It wouldn't need to be girls only." "Gift cards from Target." "We can arrange to have some meals brought to them after the birth." The Greenwood Senior Center, five blocks from the Georgian, agreed to host. Karen felt pride seeing the whole community come together, and she finalized the date of September 1 for the shower.

In late August, Karen's phone rang. It was the manager at the Georgian. Brandy was taken to the hospital by ambulance a few days before, but she was back. Karen rushed over.

She knocked at Room 16. Brandy opened the door. And when Karen looked at Brandy's face, what she saw made her drop her eyes in embarrassment.

Hands, fists, teeth, etc.

On Saturday, Aug. 22, about a week before Karen walked into Room 16, Richard walked out of it. Already loaded on Red Stripe beer, he craved more, so he went to the Aurora Grocery. It was sometime after 11 a.m.

A small corner market, the grocery offered, along with canned tuna and beer, a computer with a free Internet connection. Richard opened a cold one, and he logged into his email. A subject line read: You have an important message from Sandra D. That was Richard's sister's name, Sandra Duncan. "I clicked it," he remembers, "and it was one of those dating sites."

His click initiated a VIP tour. Richard never entered any information but pored through the site's offerings. For roughly an hour he sat, scrolled and drank. Then he meandered toward the Georgian.

Brandy met him at the door. What the hell is this? she asked. She showed him her cell phone. Richard's email account, with a confirmation code from the dating site, appeared on her screen.

Shut the fuck up, he said.

Eff you, Brandy said.

Richard picked up a box of doughnuts and threw it at her. Brandy slapped him. He hit her in the face. Fearful the baby might be injured, Brandy grabbed Richard's goatee in hopes he'd stop. Richard kept hitting.

The fight escalated.

Richard struck Brandy's face with his fist. She yanked his goatee. Hairs came out in her fingers. She yelled, Stop!

Richard smacked Brandy in the mouth. In the melee, he knocked her down. Her right fingers gouged his left cheek. A sharp pain electrified Brandy's foot.

The fight ended.

In the mirror, Brandy saw her face, then hobbled to the front office. "And I told the manager to call the cops," she recalls, "because I didn't want to lose my son."

After their fights, Brandy didn't usually leave the room, so Richard found it a little odd. Then he heard what sounded like a semi pulling into the parking lot. He looked. A fire truck. "And I'm thinking, 'Oh, fucking great.'" Richard slipped out and hid in another open room.

At 12:33 p.m., when a Seattle Police Department cruiser pulled up to the motel, Richard slunk away. Motel neighbors milled in the parking lot. One of them pointed and told an officer the man — bald head, white T-shirt — had gone south. The officer intercepted Richard two blocks away.

He noticed Richard's left cheek. How'd you get scratched? he asked.

I did it myself, Richard said.

Police escorted Richard back to the Georgian, where he was arrested for domestic violence assault and read his Miranda rights. In the police report, the officer described the weapons used: hands, fists, teeth, etc.

Seattle Fire Department staff examined Brandy's bruised and swollen face. Because of her pregnancy, an ambulance shuttled her to Harborview Medical Center, where she learned that though she was six weeks from her due date, her cervix had dilated two centimeters. But the baby was fine. An X-ray revealed a fracture in her left foot, so hospital staff fitted her with a cast. She hobbled on crutches to a cab for the ride back to the Georgian. The room was quiet. The doughnut box lay on the floor. For the first time in six months, she spent the night alone.

Motion denied

A week later, Brandy still sported a huge black eye. She couldn't attend the baby shower, not the way she looked. Karen didn't argue.

Without Richard, Brandy had to cover the Georgian's \$245 weekly rate alone. A manager took money out of his own pocket to help her out. Brandy's caseworker at a social service agency found a program that offered up to \$750 for emergency housing needs. That way, Brandy could cover rent for three weeks. The baby was due in less than four.

Brandy scrambled to find long-term shelter, but eight months pregnant and wearing an orthopedic boot, the scramble turned into a slow shuffle. Karen ferried her to almost a dozen housing agencies, where they spent hours with numerous intake personnel, only to hear, after filling out paperwork, Brandy would be put on a waiting list. One agency's staff member told her they could help after the baby was born. At the end of it, Brandy was back where she started: the Georgian.

As the due date approached, the stress exhausted her. Raising a baby alone felt

impossible. If only Richard ... Richard. She knew people would judge her, but she still cared for him. She loved him. They'd dreamed of a family together. But the violence. Maybe prison would change him.

But a change had already taken place, at least legally. On Sept. 14, 2009, Richard pleaded guilty to domestic violence assault in the fourth degree, a misdemeanor. A judge sentenced him to 120 days and initiated a no-contact order. Richard couldn't come within 500 feet of Brandy for two years, and he was barred from any type of communication. Only a judge could change that. So on Sept. 24, Brandy, desperate for help to raise a child, had Karen drive her to the courthouse.

She and Karen sat in Courtroom 1102 in the Seattle Municipal Courthouse, as a prosecutor for the city addressed Judge Adam Eisenberg.

"The first matter is going to be Richard Duncan," the prosecutor said. "In this case, Brandy Sweeney is present to address the court."

Judge Eisenberg flipped through the case file. "He's serving a substantial — Oh, my goodness. These are photos of the injuries? And the alleged victim was taken away by ambulance?"

"She was substantially pregnant at the time," the prosecutor said.

Judge Eisenberg read papers detailing Richard's prison history from the bench. "Assault with a deadly weapon charge that occurred in 2005. That's a conviction, that's a felony, and it's out of the state of Nevada." He turned a page. "He also has a DUI from 2004. That's a conviction, so that would suggest he has alcohol issues underlying. He has possession of a stolen vehicle, which is a felony from 2002." The judge's tone was no-nonsense. "He had a domestic violence battery charge from '98; it's not clear what happened in that case. All right," Judge Eisenberg said. "Ma'am, would you like to identify yourself for the record?"

"My name is Brandy Sweeney."

The judge replaced his no-nonsense tone with fatherly compassion. "And Ms. Sweeney, what did you want to tell the court?"

"He's the only person I have right now. And obviously, I'm pregnant with his baby, so I feel that he should be able to be part of the baby's life," Brandy said. "Obviously we have problems, and we probably shouldn't be in a relationship, but I feel that I should be able to contact him and address him as just, as the father of my baby."

"So, Ms. Sweeney," Judge Eisenberg said, "I don't know if you were aware of all those convictions —"

"I was aware."

"But that makes it seem substantially likely that he is a very dangerous person, particularly for you. If he consumes alcohol, you and your baby will be at risk," Judge Eisenberg said.

Brandy nodded.

"I think you should really take a step back and decide what's in the best interest of you and your baby in the long term, because any person who would cause the kind of injuries that I've seen on a woman who's expecting their child, is extremely potentially dangerous," Judge Eisenberg said.

Listening to him, part of Brandy agreed. Another part felt overwhelmed by the prospect of raising a child alone.

"I understand you're going to have a baby, which is a great thing. But I'm very, very concerned for your welfare, because if he drinks and gets violent, you know, you and the baby are in risk, so," Judge Eisenberg said, "the no-contact order is going to remain in effect."

Brandy felt dejected. Not only did she need an affordable place to live, but her hopes for a family were falling apart.

The seven-minute hearing highlighted Karen's internal struggle. She wanted Brandy to be safe, but Karen felt reluctant to tell her how to live. Instead, she decided to support Brandy. A ride to and from the courthouse was nothing big.

Their next ride together carried a little more importance.

Twilight zone

Four days after the hearing, Brandy and Karen sat at a coffee shop. Brandy felt a slight

pain arc across her lower stomach and thought: menstrual cramp. Except it couldn't be, because she was pregnant. Karen asked if they should go the hospital. Brandy told her no. Instead, Karen drove her back to the Georgian.

Every few minutes the pain would return. "Then I knew: Oh, my gosh, I've been having contractions all day." She phoned Karen, who jumped in her boyfriend's oversized truck. At the motel, she helped Brandy up into the seat.

Karen thought she'd memorized the directions, but behind the wheel, she got lost. Left turns, right turns, stop signs: They created a maze in her head. Finally, she pulled up to the University of Washington Medical Center. Forgoing a wheelchair, Brandy duck-walked to the reception desk. Her contractions were four minutes apart.

Brandy expected the contractions to become stronger, but as she walked the hallways with Karen, her contractions stalled at two minutes apart. One hour passed, another, a third.

She lay on a gurney in her light blue gown while Karen dozed on a couch. Another hour passed. Karen started awake. The contractions were still coming every two minutes.

Three hours, four hours, five, six. No change. A doctor ordered an epidural, a medical procedure to administer an anesthetic to the base of the spinal column. An anesthesiologist inserted a needle through the skin above Brandy's cervical column, hoping to see spinal fluid in the syringe. He punctured her skin a second time. A third time, a fourth, a fifth. Nothing. Before he could try again, Brandy told him to stop.

A doctor examined Brandy. With his hand on her stomach, the doctor shifted the position of the fetus. The baby inside her stirred. The labor progressed.

Brandy pushed. Karen squeezed her hand. Nurses coached them both. Brandy pushed harder. Then it happened: Brandy gave birth. A boy. Her son. Eight pounds, 14 ounces. Endorphins flooded her bloodstream. She cried. "To just see this perfect baby," Brandy remembers. "It made me feel very good."

At that same moment four miles away, Richard sat in the King County Jail. He didn't know he'd become a father.

During the pregnancy, she and Richard had discussed baby names. Richard chose the first name, and for a middle name, Brandy invoked her brother. Ian Robert Duncan. She cradled her son on her chest.

Karen found the birth powerful — and relieving. It signaled a new start for Brandy, a new life for Ian. Then Karen looked around. The room was empty. Sure, she was there. The staff, too. But what about the balloons and flowers and visitors? People should have been there to celebrate with Brandy. "I just remember feeling so lonely and lost," Karen recalls. The moment felt both happy and sad to Karen, like being in another dimension. Like "The Twilight Zone."

Brandy was indeed about to cross a boundary. Shortly after the birth, Brandy received a call: The Eastside Domestic Violence Program had a room for her in one of its confidential shelters. But the shelter, a safe house, existed in a nebulous world, its whereabouts a secret. Brandy couldn't have visitors. No one would know where to find her.

When Ian was three days old, Brandy checked out of the hospital. She slid into a waiting cab. In her past lay Tent City 3, the Georgian, the last six weeks with Karen. In her future, her son, an opportunity for change. Woven through it all was Richard.

Ian screamed his head off as she held him in the back seat. The cab driver shot her a dirty look. Brandy rocked the infant to soothe him while she tried to tamp down her own fear of going to a strange place and the likelihood of a reconnection with Richard. Nothing she did worked. So the fear rode with her, an unwelcome passenger, as Brandy and her wailing, newborn child journeyed out of the city and into the unknown.

You can read part one of The gravity of abuse on our website, www.streetroots.org. Look for the third part of the series in the next Street Roots. Republished from Real Change News, Seattle, Wash.