As a child, I spent most of my time daydreaming—imagining other places and pretending to be someone else—to avoid facing the reality of our home. My family looked ideal from the outside. I lived in a small house with my Mom, Dad, Grandma, two sisters, and a brother. Inside, it was a different story. My father physically abused my brother and sexually abused me. My mother knew, but chose not to defend us; and, I felt trapped in a life that offered no escape. For a very long time, I hated my mother. I despised her because she continued to be with my father when she absolutely recognized that he was hurting his own kids. I blamed my father’s lack of punishment squarely on her weak shoulders.

As an adult, I married a man who was as different as possible from my father. I found a returned missionary who seemed as idealistic as I was. He was fascinating. During every interaction, he understood how to captivate a crowd. He was quick-witted, charming, and brilliantly intelligent. However, things began to change: slowly at first and then swelling exponentially as the months went by until I became afraid of him. I noticed that he was jealous when I spent time with anyone else. I realized that, while he was very funny, he was also sarcastic, biting, and downright vicious toward anyone who crossed him. Despite these warnings, I thought he was simply compensating for undisclosed hurts. I thought his good side could make up for his bad side. I was wrong.

Actually, our first year as husband and wife was wonderful. Yet, the same pattern that emerged while we were dating resurfaced. My husband alternated between jealously guarding our time and actively pushing me away. Then, I found pornography saved on our computer. It seemed minor at first until I found pictures of naked children. Innocent children, surrounded by stuffed animals, being raped. Again, I felt trapped, but I was married to this man, and I wanted to help him. I confronted him. He promised that he would stop, but he continued. Even though I recognized he was having significant issues, I never imagined he would abuse his own children. It devastated me to learn he molested our little ones.

I realized, then, that I had come full circle. I now faced the choice that my mother faced long ago. That night the panic came. My heart quickened and grew louder. My breathing was fast and forced. My brain felt disconnected

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from my physical body. Mostly, my mind spiraled down into the darkness; the place where fear reigns. I felt pain, loneliness, and fear. Images circled and blurred inside my head. Finally, after enduring the panic and pain for what seemed like an eternity, I fell asleep.

The next day, I went to Legal Aid to obtain a Protective Order. I could not find a babysitter, so I sat in the little office for most of the day with my four-year-old twins and my four-month-old baby feeling scared, tired, and incredibly alone. I did everything properly: I reported the abuse, I carefully answered questions from the detective and social workers, and I dutifully did what my attorney advised. Nevertheless, on Halloween, the D.A. called to say they declined to prosecute my husband. He explained there was just not enough physical evidence, and the children were too young to be reliable witnesses if their father forced them to take the witness stand. It would be impossible to describe the despair and brokenness I felt while sobbing on the phone.

Since that time, I have learned some lessons from the experience. Ultimately, my mother and I both faced a decision that no parent should ever need to make—whether or not to report a spouse for child abuse. She chose not to tell. Not wanting to be like her, I chose a different path. I chose to leave my husband and try to protect my children. Nevertheless, we both ended up in the same place, since the state never filed charges against my father or my ex-husband. Yet, I’ve learned that my mother’s choice led to a path where the cycle of abuse continued on to the next generation. Now, I hope the fact that I chose to fight for my children permanently breaks the cycle of abuse for our family. I hope that none of my children will ever have to come full circle.