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The Monster in the Closet

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Channell Burnette, “The Monster in the Closet”

“How many women have had to be afraid and hide from the monster in the closet? Who is this monster, you ask? None other than their domestic abuser. I, myself, was once afraid of the monster. Cowering from a coward.

Domestic violence affects lives at a staggering rate. Some women become survivors; yet sadly, too many become just another victim. Labeled as a violent offender and given a state identification number with seven digits and the stigma of a criminal. Regardless of your history, your standing within the community, you are now just a number. A number with a past if you should stand up to your monster and protect yourself.

Where in the state of Virginia are the laws to protect women from our monsters? Oh right, they do not exist, unfortunately. In my experience with my own monster, I can definitely say that there should be laws implemented for our protection as well laws to assist in cases of self-defense.

And why is it that these laws do not exist in this state? The answer remains to be seen. I had the honor of speaking to a survivor the other day. Her story ended in tragedy like so many other women I have met along my journey of incarceration. This brave soul had to stand in front of the judge, broken on the inside from years of domestic abuse, and await an undeserved fate. Five years of confinement in a Virginia correctional facility. Had laws been in place to protect her, our paths would never have crossed because she would not be sitting here with me in Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women, where she does not belong.

What is astounding to me are the words she told me that were spoken by her judge. This merciful human being informed her that if there was a self-defense law in the state of Virginia, that she would not have received any time to serve at all. Wow! Yet here she is, trying to heal emotionally in a system secretly designed to perpetuate brokenness. Oh yes, they will tell you that prison is about rehabilitation. However, from the inside witnessing it firsthand, I beg to differ. There is no help for us, but us. If we do not help ourselves and each other, the system certainly will not. It is the same system which has failed us already.

It failed us thrice. The first failure was when we were being beaten within inches of our lives and called the police. They showed up and what did they do? Instruct us both, my abuser and me, to calm down or else we'd both be hauled off to jail. What? The second failure was in the courtroom where we women stood face to face with someone ready to tell us the outcome of our future like a fortune-teller. Only in our cases, it became our misfortune. The third failure was our punishment. If we were forced to serve time in prison, we got stuck inside the belly of a different type of monster, disconsolately.

This monster called Domestic Violence has dug its claws deep into the souls of many women and ripped it to shreds. We became torn. Torn into wanting liberation; and torn because of the fear to leave. Too many of us stayed. I did. Out of fear. Out of love. Out of the desperation of thinking he'll change. Wanting him to change. Wanting him to find help. But in the process, slowly losing ourselves.

I questioned everything about myself as I went through this ordeal. Was I ugly? Was I fat? Was I stupid? Why was I not enough to make him happy? What could I possibly do differently to

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make him love me and stop hitting me? Little did I know the problem was not with me, but something broken inside of him that only he could fix. But before I figured this out, I had already had enough and decided to defend myself. Take the law into my own hands and protect myself.

Being a law-abiding citizen, I should never have been forced to act as an officer of the law and protect myself. But I did. This resulted in a felony offense. I was the victim, but became a villain when I was forced to do the job of the law.