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The first time I saw the signs of child abuse, I was five years old. Two children down the street from my house, a typical suburban neighborhood. I wish I could remember their names. Instead, I remember seeing the strangle marks on the boys neck. He was about my age, and his sister was a year or two younger. I remember hearing a little girl screaming, and my dad went running, and jumped into a ditch where the girl, right in front of her house was drowning. I knew the parents would kick them out of the house in the middle of the night, and I knew they would come to my house to be fed. They disappeared one night, and I never saw them again. I still remember them.

Child abuse. We tend to think of it happening in bad neighborhoods, with poverty, but it strikes in beautiful homes, in sparkly new neighborhoods too. I grew up knowing men hit women even in the nicest of neighborhoods. We have grown as a society, and recognize that sometimes abuse doesn't leave just physical marks, but marks in the very depths of one's being. Much could be said about abuse itself and it's consequences, and what causing it. However, I would like us to consider poverty and abuse.

Five years ago, I was on vacation with my family in California. It was an extravagant vacation, trekking through California, staying at the nicest resorts. We were the family that on the outside appeared to have everything. We had met together with my best friend of twenty years, and her family at a beach just north of



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San Diego. As we unloaded the car with all our stuff, the yelling began. It was my former husband yelling at my then 15 year old son. My fifteen year old son had not packed his dad's flipper for body boarding. Living in Texas, my son hadn't grown up knowing much about the ocean, so he didn't even know he should grab his dad's flippers. "How could you be so stupid? You've ruined my vacation!" He ranted and raged, and my best friend volunteered to go back to get the flippers while I tried to calm him down. It wasn't until later I was even able to realize how bad it had gotten. My children were used to this- which upsets me to this day. My best friend's children were not. Her children went to her and made her promise that if their dad ever talked to them like that, that she would leave.

If you had seen my family five years ago on a normal day, you'd have thought we were the picture perfect family. My children were always dressed nice. We went on beautiful vacations, and lived in perfect suburbia. However, if you saw where we are at now, you would perhaps come to flawed conclusions. We tend to associate poverty with abuse. Does abuse happen in poor homes- absolutely! Are there inherent risks, absolutely. But wealth, or lack there of, does not dictate whether there is abuse.

I've lived in the neighborhood I do now for two years. Everyone knows about this neighborhood in this community, and many aren't too happy it exists. I am thankful for my time here though as I complete my teaching degree. I have learned



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so much myself and from my neighbors. I have learned sometimes life becomes about survival, and survival can dictate choices we might not want. I feel that what I want you to know is that being “poor” does not mean we love our children any less. We may not make it to all the open house nights and we may not complete our children’s projects for them, but the struggles we face are basic- how to keep a roof over our heads, and food on our table. I can promise you though, at least for us, despite living below poverty level, we are so much better off.

Being a single parent is hard. It is especially hard when struggling to survive, and give our children a better life. It can be easy to see the external, and make assumptions. I remember in one of my first education classes, a professor was talking about a boy whose mother was single, and had had many boyfriends, according to her. The professor concluded that the mother is probably a prostitute and started laughing. I sat there, red cheeked, overwhelmed and ashamed. Is this how single mothers are seen? I was concerned about the boy, more from the perspective of concern for his well-being. At the same time, I also see first hand women trying to survive. I’ve met these women. They work making minimum wage, but minimum wage doesn’t pay all the bills. Perhaps they are making compromises, and being with a just ok boyfriend so there’s a roof and food, again, it’s that survival instinct. We can be so naïve and believe in the whole, “women take all a man’s money after a divorce”, but personal experience, and seeing it over and over again, has shown me that many times, it takes years just to track down the



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father, and then to finally get the courts to act, to even get child support.

It is easy to look at the exterior of a given situation and make assumptions. I've done it. I've had it done to me. You have too. I find myself asking, what do I want from you reading this. I want you to know, there are moms like me. Single mothers, going to school, and working, doing the best we can to survive and give our children better. If you see us right now, it may appear we aren't doing enough for our children. Believe me, it hurts us more than can be put into words. But we are making sacrifices that mean not only are we emotionally better off, very soon we will be completely free.

Whether you're the picture perfect wife who endures things behind closed doors because you see no other alternative, or the single mother struggling to keep a roof over your head, let us see one another as mothers, and let us hold out hope and encouragement to one another, both for our sake, and for our children's. I know some of you will say, I am not the picture perfect wife, I fail in all these areas, and somewhere you believe you deserve what is happening to you. You don't. If you can't believe that yet, know your children don't. We may be giving our children a nice house, but they are learning from us how women are to be treated, and how they deserve to be treated, and if they learn they deserve to be treated horribly, they will believe they deserve it in their marriages, and the cycle will continue. For me, saying no more was the hardest thing I ever did, and I didn't even do it for myself, I



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did it for my children. I know it's hard, but with that same strength that endures now, may that same strength move you towards freedom.