

Friends or Foes...

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was starting to scare me. We got in the car and on the way home my usually talkative six-year-old sat in silence. I felt sick. I had a feeling something was wrong. I had to find out.

"Baby what is this 'secret' you and Papa have?" I asked her patting her knee trying to make light of it. "I can't tell," she said, never turning to look at me. "You can tell me, baby. You know you can tell Momma anything and we don't keep secrets from each other, remember?" I asked again. Then, she turned to me, and I saw two little tears running down her face. "Will you be mad at me if I tell?" she asked. "I just don't want to see Papa anymore." And she burst into tears. I pulled the car off the road. I wanted to scream, and I was getting scared. All that kept running through my mind was NO!! No!! Don't let her tell me something has happened! He couldn't! We love these people like family! Not my child! Not the child I have loved and tried to protect all my life! I pulled over and turned off the radio. I unlocked my seatbelt and reached over to the passenger side of the car and grabbed my tiny little six-

year-old in my arms. I was trying not to be panicky, but I was just as scared as she. "What happened baby? Please tell me. Tell me now. I'm not mad at you. You won't be in any trouble." She told me they had been watching TV, and Papa told her he was going to go take a shower. She told me he came out of his bedroom, and he was naked. He asked her if she had ever "seen one of these before" holding his genitalia in his hands, and he asked her if she wanted to touch it. She was scared, and said she told him, "Papa, please, please put that away." She said she backed up near the corner of the couch and watched while he took matters into his own hands, and she didn't know what he was doing with it, but it scared her, and she knew it was bad. She said she covered her eyes and still begged him to stop. Eventually, he did stop she said he turned went into the bedroom and came back out fully dressed. She said he came and sat next to her and pulled her up to him on the couch and told her then. "Remember this is just our secret."

I didn't know what to do.

I sat in the car in the dark, holding my six-year-old. We were both crying, and then I got mad, really mad. A part of me wanted to turn the car around, go right back to that house, burst in and just kill him, hit him, beat him to death! What do I do now? Do I call the police? Would he deny it? This would be his word against a six-year-old. What about the friendship with my best friend? This was her FATHER! Her mother and I were so close also! What was I going to do? We continued on home and I got my upset six-year-old ready for bed and took her to bed with me. I promised her everything would be all right. How could this have happened? How could someone we trusted and loved have done this? My friend and her mom would be sick as well! What was I going to do? I sat up all night. I was mad, hurt, sick and confused! I got up at 6:00 am, called their house and Nana answered. I told her I would not be bringing my baby to her to baby sit today because I did not feel well and I was not going to work. She sensed something wrong in my voice, and wanted to know if we needed anything and asked what was wrong. I told her she needed to get "Papa" on the phone right now. She said he was outside having coffee and getting the paper. "Go get him. I'll wait," I said flatly. She knew something was wrong, but she did not know what. She went to get him and he finally came to the phone. "I know the secret," I said flatly. Surprisingly, he didn't deny it. He started crying and apologizing on the phone. He said he was sorry. He begged me not to call the

police and said we all needed to get together to talk about it. I told him he would never ever be seeing either of us again, nor would we be setting foot in his house. He asked for forgiveness. He said he would get help. He said as a Christian, I needed to give him another chance. I heard Nana in the background confused asking what was going on. I heard him tell her what had happened, and she started crying. I couldn't speak anymore, so I hung up. I called in sick to work and spent the day calling daycares in Jacksonville.

About noon my girlfriend called. She had heard the news from them and had a much different attitude than I had expected. I picked up the phone to her screaming in my ear, "Don't you DARE say a word about this to ANYONE! It was a mistake! I think your daughter made the whole thing up! My father would NEVER do anything like this!" I assured her no six-year-old could make up a story about this, and her father had not denied it.

To make an already long story a little shorter. I didn't press charges against him. He promised me he would get help. Nana and my friend couldn't even look us in the face anymore. We cut off all relationships with them and we lost our adopted family. It made us all sick in the long run. He got away with traumatizing my child. She lost her adopted grandparents, the only ones she had ever really known, and I lost a very good friend as well. I kept my silence and did nothing. Two years later, I picked up the newspaper and what do I read? A man on the Westside had been

arrested for exposing himself to a seven-year-old girl at a public swimming pool in Orange Park. Well, guess who it was? Guess who went on, after promising me he was going to get help, exposing himself not only to her, but to other innocent children in his neighborhood?

Now, he was a known and registered pedophile. He was the one I had let off the hook after traumatizing my own child years before. What had I done? Where is the line between friendship and justice drawn? I felt now like I was an accessory to the fact knowing how this man had been. Why hadn't I stood up for my own child more and called the police the night it happened? WHY?! How many more innocent lives might have been spared if I had only done the right thing?

Now, my daughter is 18. She has never forgotten that night, nor have I. I try to live with the fact that I let someone off the hook I cared about as a father, but what did I do for my own flesh and blood? What justice did I get her? None. What children did I have a part in injuring by never reporting his sickness to the police? I live with this everyday. If I had to do it all over again, I would have handled this so differently. I know other people have been in similar situations, and I'm not alone. If you are reading this and you can relate, or if you know of a story like this, I ask you to just look deep inside yourself. Stand up for what is right. Stand up for yourself. Stand up for your children. The person who hurts them may be as sorry as they can be. They can promise you it will never happen again. They can promise you they will get help. They can lecture you about forgiveness and being a good Christian. Then, they can walk out the door and do it again to your sister's children, your neighbors, your children's friends.

Think hard.

Think again.

Call the police.

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