

FOURTEEN

THE JUICE BOX

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When you are young you feel that you are invincible—bulletproof. You know everything you need to know, and you can do no wrong. You feel that the world is your personal oyster and that you're just waiting for that one grain of sand to make you the perfect pearl. Then, in an instant, youth's fragile window of optimism gets shattered and you realize that the world is now your cage. In one downward stroke of some Judge's gavel you are forever branded a felon. The man in black has made you another American statistic. "Oh, don't feel bad," he says. Your Honor conveniently forgets to tell you to leave your hopes and dreams at the door.

Crushed like dust between the gavel and the lectern, yet too ignorant to truly understand the ramifications of your actions: the price you have to pay has become your future. However, all this may sound trite to you, the reader, as of now. Let me assure you that this is not some modern-day gothic writing. This has become my life, my reality, the tale of being branded a felon.

I could sit here and write about my crime or the preconceived injustice of my incarceration but to me all of that pales in comparison to the reality of life after judgment and sentencing. The true punishments and hardships that come with being a felon, a word that follows you around like a twister, destroying all future hopes, dreams, jobs, accomplishments and any true desire to be a productive member of society.

ON BATTLING MONSTERS

Nietzsche wrote, "Battle not with the monsters lest you become a monster and if you gaze into the abyss the abyss also gazes into you." That's exactly what happened. I do not know what

made me believe that I was so special, or that I was ever above everyone I surrounded myself with. I had become the monster I had been battling. The abyss I looked into did more than gaze into me. The abyss swallowed me, caged me in a dark void known as the criminal justice system. In the United States we spend more than \$40,000 a year to incarcerate each prison inmate and only \$8,000 to educate each elementary school student. We are all aware the criminal justice systems drastically needs restructuring. Maybe, just maybe, instead of caging monsters and sending them to this abyss we should shine a light of knowledge into that abyss to educate the monsters. *Gasp!* Give them life skills with good vocations then maybe just maybe we would see the abyss roll back and away, to watch the monsters transform into something just a little bit better.

NO MORE SQUALOR THAN ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY

The friends I chose to surround myself with in the past were less than desirable. Homeless and often times dirty in ways that didn't seem to bother them all that much. I remember such feelings of superiority. I wasn't an addict; I had a nice home, a clean home with comforts. I should have known better. Maybe I did. I felt that I was helping my "friends" by giving them a safe place to sleep, a night of much needed rest with a home cooked meal, a shower and clean clothes.

During that time I felt like a mad scientist studying addictions yet I was dancing with disaster. There I was, high in my observatory as I studied all sides of life, trying to understand what made them tick. Sometimes they even seemed happy living this way, with nothing. The simple pocket full of dope and some crumpled up dollar bills was all it took to make them feel like kings and queens not ever realizing they were Kings and Queens of Squalor.

7:00 A.M.

I remember the day well. I set my coffee mug on the bathroom vanity. I glanced over to my clock radio as the words “Who are you to wave your finger?” softly played from the tiny speakers. The digital neon blue clock face changed from 6:59 to 7:00 a.m. as I turned to step into my shower thinking, *I am going to cut it close getting to my interview on time.* One foot in and one foot out. I hear what sounds like a battering ram at my back door. That’s exactly what it is. I barely get my t-shirt pulled over my head before the “friend” I was “helping” woke up from dozing on the couch and ran in frantically to ask what was going on. Before one utterance could leave my mouth a mass of dark guns and bright lights rained down on me like I was some terrible terrorist. Officers barked “Get down!” and “On the floor” at me to the sound of Tool’s “The Pot”—“you must have been out of your head”—playing in the background.

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I was a freshly turned 21-year-old when I became a felon. I had never been in trouble with the law before. I was young and idealistic with no true concept of how the criminal justice system worked. In a word, naïve.

SHATTERED DREAMS

As a passion-filled youth with a true zeal for life, I had so many ideas and dreams for my life and the future. I planned for a future with a college education, then a prestigious job. I wanted to be lawyer and a counselor that worked with children and young adults that had come from troubled or broken homes, America’s at-risk youth. I wanted to be somebody, somebody who could make a difference. I felt I had all the time in the world to do this. I thought foolishly that I had a few more years before I had to grow up and

start walking the path of an adult life. I wouldn't say that I had lived a charmed life during my younger years; I had my fair share of struggles, hardships and heartaches. I can, however, tell you that I wanted more. I felt that I could do better for myself than a mediocre career and lifestyle. I realized too late that none of this would come to pass. I had become the keeper of my broken and shattered dreams.

A BIT OF BRIGHTNESS IN ALL THAT DARK

I would love to be able to tell you that everything has been sunshine and daisies for me after that morning, however, that would make me a liar. I did my time, paid my fine. I completed the inpatient treatment and was told I was not an addict. In fact, I didn't even have an addictive personality. I completed the Intensive Supervised Probation Program at Probation and Parole successfully. I even got myself off to college, and I take that as a win. I was still young enough to believe that everything was behind me now, that college could be that one bright light amid all the darkness.

MY DAUGHTER

I was in my second year at Casper College when I got the surprise of my life. I was pregnant. *Impossible!* I thought the doctors told me it would never happen. They couldn't tell me what was wrong with me, only that another one of my dreams, that of being a mother, was gone. I was 24-years-old and pregnant with a miracle, my daughter. On the morning of September 9th, 2011, I got to hold my daughter, my miracle, for the first time. I had turned 25 and was a college dropout, a felon and now a mother. No more bartending or cooking to pay the bills. How could I give this perfect princess the life she deserved? My daughter is the only thing I have done correctly in this fucked up and twisted nightmare that became my life at 21. How could I turn this nightmare into a fairytale? I felt like Alice, looking the wrong way through the

looking glass and so far down the rabbit hole that all the magic cake in the world could not free me. The moment a woman becomes a mother the real world comes knocking on her heart. It was time to grow up.

ADULT REALITY

Who knew it was legal to not rent to felons? Here I was a single mom living responsibly with satisfied court obligations, and yet I was still unable to procure clean and stable housing. I was branded a felon and that was all anyone was able to see when they looked at me. “Frustrated and fed up” did not begin to describe my feelings. I felt like the world was punishing my daughter for my past mistakes.

Hate, rage and despair. What kind of twisted society do I live in, that would hinder a family from finding a home? At the end of my rope, I felt like I was halfway down the dark well of despair and just waiting to hit bottom. Adult reality seeped in, cold in my bones like dank well water. I was hoping, waiting, praying that somebody, anybody, would throw me down a rope.

CATCHING A BREAK

The rope came down when I least expected it and not a moment too soon. My mother’s old chef needed to sell his house. I packed up my daughter to go investigate, hoping that it was not too good to be true. “The gods give a damn,” I thought. “They finally threw me a bone.”

A BRIEF REPOSE

I took the house; my mama didn’t raise no fool, and I knew better than to look a gift horse in the mouth. I had a new and beautiful home, a perfect place to raise my daughter. An ideal setting to start my new life. I move in my fiancé, Wesley, and we

start planning the next chapter in our own personal fairytale: a wedding.

PASSPORTS AND VISAS REQUIRED

Simple times and simple thoughts make for simple pleasures. I had all the hard parts done in my wedding planning. Then came the fun part for most couples: the honeymoon. Only who knew that Australia, a former penal colony, wouldn't let a felon on its shores? Ever the optimist I then checked out Canada, thinking they would have something that Wesley and I would like.

As it turns out, Canada was stricter than a Catholic nun. They would not let me in as a felon. They even say no to people who have had a DUI. Tired of my ideas getting shot down like enemy aircraft, I decided to do some digging to see where I could travel. Countries in the United Kingdom have requirements like hurdles in a decathlon. No one can enter the country if they have a felony that carried more than a twenty-three-month sentence. Immigration officers are free to change their mind at the border if they feel you intend harm. You can go to Japan but only if you enter with a return flight out within 90 days. Other hoops to jump through that prevent felons from international travel include: being subject to a subpoena, having outstanding warrants, unpaid federal loans that stem from being a prisoner abroad, or being told by a judge they can't leave the country. Anyone that owes more than \$5,000 in child support will not be able to obtain a U.S. passport whether they are a convicted felon or not. For those incarcerated for several years this is highly probable. Pay up or stay home.

MONSTERS COME CALLING AGAIN

Just as in every fairytale ever written, the good, idyllic scenes have to come to an end, and the big bad villain appears. It was a typical quiet night in my family's life. My fiancé had our daughter in the bathtub. I could hear happy splashing sounds and loving conversations from my relaxed repose on my bed. Then I

heard my front screen door slam as someone unexpected came in. Wondering who it could be this late, I started to rise. I didn't have to wonder long. Charging into my room, waving a gun, came the destroyer of all things good. As he brandished the largest hand gun I've ever seen I realized, "I know this person." I can't believe what I am seeing and hearing. All I can think is get up and go get the danger away from your baby. Protect, protect and give in.

LOST DAYS AND CALLS FROM JAIL

Three days later I woke up in a place I never thought I'd be again. *Jail*. I felt terrible, every part of my body ached and was swollen. I had only disjointed and broken synapses of memories. Dazed, confused, lost, heartsick and broken, I pushed the tiny button. Fearful as the disembodied voice comes through the square box in the wall. I asked, "Why am I here?" I asked for the date. Three days passed. I thought back to bath time. I asked for the phone. I was given permission. Stumbling the dead walk of a zombie in more ways than one, I called Wes. The dam broke inside of me. Physical and emotional pain crashed over me in a wave of despair. Two minutes was all we had. Lawyers, money, charges and waiting on the judge for bond. Far from home. The damage is done with lost days and jailhouse phone calls.

GINGERBREAD HOUSE AND LEGAL FEES

I did another 23 days in jail. 23 of the hardest days of my life. We lost the house in order to pay legal fees. I never got to walk through that front door again. I was blessed this time, I suppose. I had an amazing fiancé to take care of my daughter. Packing all of our belongings into a storage unit while paying for a good attorney to represent me. My fairy tale house went like the old witch's' gingerbread house in Hansel and Gretel. In my mind's eye, up in flames. Devoured. Nothing left but dust.

PRESSURE MAKES DIAMONDS

Between then and now I did manage to have my wedding, though not at all like the one I had planned. But it was on the day I picked, at least. There was no fancy honeymoon in some beautiful foreign port. My parents gave me a fixer-upper to live in, nothing like what I had before. We were not homeless and totally destitute. I did all this feeling like some alien force was animating my body. I was on auto-pilot, barely functioning. I had panic attacks any time I was forced to leave the house. I couldn't sleep. I felt constantly afraid. I hid inside the dark and cluttered house.

Praying this nightmare was in my head yet, knowing it was not. The stress on my new marriage was unbelievable. Wes was the only one working. We were still making hefty payments to the lawyer plus the cost of traveling for court dates. To say that we were struggling was the understatement of the year. I had good days and very bad days. The end of all the court stuff was in sight, but my marriage was cracking. I thought pressure made diamonds. Only we weren't turning into some rare and precious stone, we were breaking and about to destroy one another.

PERFECT STORM

I sometimes think that my marriage was destined to fail. I mean, what kind of sane person gets married during the worst storm of the year? Wyoming had a record-breaking snow storm on October 4th, 2013, my wedding day. That storm perfectly matched the storm inside me. I realized too late that Wes was the glue holding all of my pieces together, how dependent I had become on him. I don't blame him for turning to alcohol. I hold no grudge for the fights or the abuse we threw at each other like snowballs. All I knew was he had to go before we all died in that perfect storm.

BRANDED

Wes was gone. It was just me and my daughter. I dug down deep and started trying to put the pieces of my life back together. Looking back now I realize that I just put some tacky glue on my pieces when I really needed Gorilla Glue to hold myself together. I started putting in job applications, five to ten a day. I didn't discriminate; I just parked and hit every business on the block. I did this every day for three months. I think it was that little box at the end of the application. You know the one that asks, "Have you ever been convicted of a felony? Check yes or no." I am federally mandated to answer honestly, so I always check yes. In the comment space I always clearly print, "Will discuss upon interview."

The few interviews that I did get went well or they went terrible. I was told one time that they were worried how I would react to a customer complaint. I did temp agencies. I tried the Workforce Services Center. I tried asking my probation officer for help, but I was told, "I don't know what more I can do for you. I've given you all the help and advice I have available and can." Meanwhile, I'm selling anything of value that I can to feed my daughter and trying desperately to keep my head above water. I went to the Department of Family Services for food stamps and was denied. Wes and I were separated, but still legally married so they based this on his income. That small "married but separated" status also made me ineligible for Climb Wyoming or any other government program. I was already broken, and I was fast becoming defeated. I felt stuck in a downward spiral.

I felt that I should stand on the street corner with a sign: "**I AM A FELON LET ME DO ALL YOUR HARD WORK FOR YOU.**" I thought, "What was the point of working so hard to better my life when all anyone could see was the felon, not the woman behind it?" I felt that the world was trying to keep me down in the slums of American life. I was a felon at twenty-one and again at twenty-seven. It didn't really matter until I had my daughter, and I

had matured, but I still felt trapped. I realized that I, for better or for worse, had been permanently branded.

THE JUICE BOX

Such a simple little thing a juice box is. Something that every toddler loves. A cold square, no bigger than a hand, a cute little bendy straw wrapped and stuck on the back. A self-contained box of refreshing goodness. It is amazing how one tiny little thing can bring a person to their knees. A simple question from my daughter—"Mom, can I have a juice box?"—didn't break me. It was the answer, "No, honey, we don't have any," that started the cracks. Then, in her three-year-old voice so grown up, "Well, Mom, let's go buy some," only to be told, "I don't have any money, baby." You can see she is thinking. What comes next was the turning point. "That's okay, Mom, I know you can make me one." That shattered me. I splintered, I exploded like a star going super nova. There is no pain in the entire universe that is as profound as not being able to provide for your child. I am for once at a loss for words. I can't begin to describe the pain and disjointed thoughts that juice box caused me.

WANT HELP? GO TO PRISON

The juice box had defeated me, broken me. It had made my failures glaringly obvious. I made arrangements for my daughter and my dogs. I had decided to go to prison. I had heard that I could get help to put the pieces of my life back together while there. I sit here in the Wyoming Women's Center writing this now. I obviously wasn't thinking straight. I mean what kind of woman decides to throw her life away and go to prison? A broken one, that's who. But I had heard that education classes and vocational training were available for an inmate.

We all want to be a phoenix and have the ability to rise from the ashes of past mistakes and failures to be something beautiful again. I was told that once released I would be eligible for help from the

Department of Vocational Rehabilitation and Department of Family Services, that I would have the tools made available to me to rebuild my life. I've been lucky. I am one of the last inmates to get into the welding program. I'll leave as a college graduate and a certified fork lift operator with accreditations as a certified welder from the American Welding Society. I have also written this memoir to hopefully show one person the harsh realities and everyday struggles for a mother who has been branded a felon. All that it cost me was my freedom.

SENSELESS

America's dubious distinction
 Incarcerated now, 2.3 million
 Highest in the world
 Half a million
 Drug offenses only

The break down
 State prisons 1,351,000
 Federal prisons 211,000
 Futures taken away
 Families torn apart

636,000 a year
 Out the gates
 May come back
 Come back to what?
 Anything worth left?

820,000 on parole
 Succeed or fail
 Life's hindering help
 Unrealistic human expectations
 Home or away again

Only alternative offered
3.8 million on probation
Onerously set expectations
Failures blaringly obvious
Forcing the changes

Could you live it?