

OLIVIA'S STORY

INSIDE THIS PLACE,
NOT OF IT

NARRATIVES FROM
WOMEN'S PRISONS

COMPILED AND EDITED BY
ROBIN LEVI AND AYELET WALDMAN
FOREWORD BY MICHELLE ALEXANDER



AN EXCERPT FROM

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ColdType

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THE BOOK

Edited by Ayelet Waldman and Robin Levi, **Inside This Place** reveals some of the most egregious human rights violations within women's prisons in the United States. In their own words, the thirteen narrators in this book recount their lives leading up to incarceration and their experiences inside—ranging from forced sterilization and shackling during childbirth, to physical and sexual abuse by prison staff. Together, their testimonies illustrate the harrowing struggles for survival that women in prison must endure.

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THE AUTHORS:

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INTRODUCTION

A BATTALION OF SURVIVORS

by Robin Levi & Ayelet Waldman

The long drive out from the San Francisco Bay Area to Valley State Prison for Women in Chowchilla, California, is always a stressful one. The anxiety begins early, when we get dressed, making sure to comply with the ever-shifting, always onerous dress code for visitors to the prison. There is a long list of banned colors and fabrics: no denim or chambray, no lime green or orange, no tan, no attire similar in any way to military fatigues. In regulations reminiscent of Catholic girls' schools of the 1970s, skirts must end no more than two inches above the knee, and "spaghetti" straps are forbidden. Jewelry is limited to only two rings, and one set of earrings. And then there is the most bizarre rule of all, given how closely all interactions between prisoners and visitors are monitored: female visitors are forbidden to wear underwire bras.

The closer we get to the prison, by the time we have driven through Tracy, Modesto, and finally Turlock, with its almond orchards and fields of cows, a pall usually descends. There is something about the prospect of submitting to the absolute and arbitrary authority of the prison Corrections staff that intimidates and depresses even the most seasoned prison visitor. Although we've sent in the names, social security numbers, and driver's license copies of the interviewers, although we've

managed to track down a working tape recorder that complies with prison regulations—no digital recorders are permitted, only MiniDisc recorders (of a specific brand and type no longer produced)—we know, from experience, that it is still possible that we will be turned away. It's possible that the women whose visits we requested might have broken one of the myriad prison rules and ended up in segregation, and thus banned from our visit. We know that we could be turned away for this or any reason, or for no reason at all.

When we pull into the prison parking lot, we grow quiet, careful of listening ears and watchful eyes. We pass through the metal detector and stand before a twenty-foot-tall barbed fence, waiting for it to slide open. Then we cross the field to the prison building, greeted by small bunnies hopping through the short grass—an incongruity in the otherwise barren environment.

Once we've passed through the rigmarole of metal detectors, barbed wire, and pat-downs to get to the visiting room, and the women whom we are visiting make it through their own gauntlet (strip, squat, cough), our malaise always lifts. Our spirits are raised not by the topics of the interviews, which are always and inevitably painful, but by the women themselves. Despite being incarcerated under grim conditions, they demonstrate dignity, courage, and generosity as they recount their often traumatic experiences before and since their incarceration.

The narratives in this collection, as told by these individuals and others in correctional facilities across the country, highlight human rights abuses in the U.S. prison system. Narrators describe their lack of access to adequate healthcare, including mental healthcare and pregnancy care. They also recount experiences of questionable medical procedures—Olivia Hamilton was forced to have a cesarean section, while Sheri Dwight had her ovaries removed without her consent or knowledge. Our narrators describe sexual and physical abuse suffered inside the prison, and the daily indignities they face just trying to ensure they have enough toilet paper, soap, and menstrual pads. In addition, they recount the myriad abusive situations that led to their imprisonment and to recidivism.

These include the lack of adequate treatment for drug addiction, domestic and sexual violence, and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

The women featured in this volume come from all over the United States, represent a variety of ethnicities, and their offenses range from the minor (check forgery, drug possession) to the most serious (murder). These are women who have been silent for most of their lives, whose desires and needs were ignored by often abusive families and spouses, and, later, by prison authorities. They tell us their stories here because it is, for many of them, the first chance they've had to be heard.

According to the U.S. Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2.3 million people are currently imprisoned in the United States—more per capita than any other country in the world. People in U.S. prisons are routinely subjected to physical, sexual, and mental abuse. While abuse in male prisons is well documented, women in prison suffer in relative anonymity. This disparity is especially troubling, since women in prison are in many cases more vulnerable to rights violations for three main reasons: women's prisons are generally more geographically isolated and thus less subject to outside oversight; women are predominantly incarcerated for nonviolent offenses; and, due to their histories of sexual and physical abuse, women are both more likely to suffer serious health consequences and less likely to complain of abuses within the prison system.

As Michelle Alexander points out in her foreword, people of color are vastly over-represented in the American criminal justice system. According to a 2009 report by the U.S. Census Bureau, one out of every nine black men between the ages of twenty and thirty-four is behind bars. This racial disparity is also reflected in the women's prisons in this country. Nearly half of those imprisoned are women of color. Thirty-four percent are black, despite the fact that black people make up only

6.7 percent of the general population.¹

Though women make up only a small minority of the prison and jail population, slightly less than 7 percent, their numbers are increasing at rates that far surpass men. In 1977, 11,212 women were in prison. As of 2007, that number had increased to 107,000. The number of women in prison has grown dramatically since the 1980s due to several factors: mandatory minimum sentencing for drug crimes which preclude judicial discretion, the dismantling of the U.S. mental health system, and increased prosecution of “survival” crimes, which include check forgery and minor embezzlement. Over the last four decades, hundreds of thousands of women have been sentenced to jail and prison for nonviolent and first-time offenses, for offenses that arise from drug addiction or mental health problems, or as a result of minor involvement in offenses perpetrated by their husbands or boyfriends.

Because women are a minority in the prison system, they face particular challenges. A prison healthcare system designed for men that mandates, for example, shackling during transportation to and from the hospital, suddenly rises from the unpleasant to the horrific when the transported prisoner shackled at the ankles is a woman in the late stages of active labor, as experienced by Olivia Hamilton.

One of the most striking things about our experience in collecting these narratives has been the overwhelming prevalence of histories of sexual abuse. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, two-thirds of women in prison have experienced sexual and physical abuse in their lives, a statistic that was reflected in our interviews. Francesca Salavieri was sexually abused from the age of six by family members, while Teri Hancock was given as a “gift” to a step-uncle to abuse as he liked. The sexual abuse and violence that women in prison endure usually comes at the hands not of other prisoners, but of guards and staff. Not once in

¹ Throughout this volume, we use the inclusive term “black people” to describe all people of African descent, including those whose families have lived in the United States for generations, and those who have arrived more recently and may not identify as African American.

creating this volume did we come across a woman who described being sexually abused by another prisoner. On the contrary, when women are raped, or when sex is demanded as payment for “privileges” such as medical care or family visits, the perpetrators are guards and staff.

Because prisons are managed under a patchwork of state regulations and are increasingly privatized, there is variation across the country in prison conditions and access to remedies when abuses occur. In Michigan, for example, until the groundbreaking work of attorney Deborah LaBelle, women were subject to horrific and near-constant sexual abuse, while in other states, because of more enlightened prison practices, sexual violence is nearly nonexistent.

Despite state-to-state differences, overall commonalities across the country are striking. Healthcare is rarely adequate, and usually requires a co-pay that is difficult for women to manage on their paltry incomes, which for most women in prison is less than \$1 a day. Their daily lives are often characterized by degrading treatment and routine privacy violations. Women across the country experience enormous difficulty in maintaining family relationships, or even relationships with their legal representation, because of the erection of barriers to communication with the outside world.

Eighty percent of women in prison in the United States are the primary caretakers of children, but women’s facilities are few and far between, and are often located far from families and communities. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, for mothers to maintain relationships with their children. Marilyn Sanderson, for example, has not seen her children in fifteen years, and yet she thinks of them constantly. Women are isolated in these distant facilities, separated both from families and from advocates, and are forced to navigate often draconian regulations to maintain letter or phone contact. Even then, they are subject to the whims of prison officials, who sometimes refuse to deliver mail without legitimate reason, as happened to Teri Hancock. Women must jump through a myriad of bureaucratic hoops to receive visits from family and friends, if visitation is allowed at all. For six years,

Emily Madison lost all her visitation rights because she was found in possession of pills: a Motrin and an iron capsule. Most egregiously, even telephone contact is strictly limited, with collect calls priced far beyond the norm in the outside world, and access is often dependent on deposits as high as \$50.

Generally, it has become ever more difficult for people in prison to assert their basic human rights to protection from violence, to decent conditions of confinement, and to minimal healthcare. In 1996, Congress passed the Prisoner Litigation Reform Act (PLRA), which erected procedural barriers to litigation that preclude civil rights lawsuits in the vast majority of instances. Women in prison are forced to rely on internal prison-grievance systems, which vary widely from state to state, and are often inadequate to remedy even the most blatant violations. For many like Maria Taylor, attempts to hold officers responsible for their abusive behavior result in frightening acts of retribution. In addition, many prisons bar the media from freely communicating with people inside prison, which keeps the public from ever knowing what goes on behind bars.

In reading this volume, it is important to realize that, while the narratives here are skewed toward people who have been sentenced to long terms for serious crimes, this does not reflect the actual population of women in prison and jail. Of the over 100,000 women who are currently under the jurisdiction of the criminal justice system, more than half are imprisoned for nonviolent or victimless crimes such as drug possession, prostitution, or check forging. However, it was impossible for us to gain access to women in the network of county and city jails, where nearly half of women serve their time. Our work was limited to various state prison systems, and within those, the women who were most likely to participate had served sufficient time to build up the reserves of strength necessary to discuss the intimate and often traumatic details described in these narratives, as well as to develop the relationships with advocates such that we knew to contact them.

Furthermore, it is these women, who are serving sentences of decades or life without parole, who have the least to lose from exposing the truth of their conditions of confinement, and the most to gain from risking the often terrible retaliation to which such honesty exposes them. If, as a result of this volume, awareness is raised and change is made, they will still be inside to benefit from it. Additionally, telling their stories has led many women to experience feelings of personal empowerment, control, and a restoration of dignity.

There were many more women who wanted to participate in this project but were unable to because the prisons in which they are incarcerated are too far away or difficult to gain access to. In response, we set up a system whereby women could send in letter narratives. Sarah Chase, a young woman serving twenty years to life, was sexually abused by a guard who was then fired. The other guards then began a campaign of harsh retaliatory abuse, which ultimately led to Sarah being moved to a prison thousands of miles from her home, allegedly for her own protection. This prison was physically inaccessible to us, but Sarah participated in the project primarily through letters, and her narrative is thus included in the volume.

Inside this Place, Not of It is the result of more than seventy interviews with over thirty individuals, conducted over the course of ten months. For this project, we assembled a team of nineteen interviewers, who fanned out across the country, visiting women inside prisons, halfway houses, and in their homes. Fact-checking was conducted to the best of our abilities, but did not come without its challenges.

We used court records, human rights reports, medical records, and multiple external sources, but it is important to bear in mind that the narratives in this volume recount instances of abuse at the hands of the very system that controls the paper trail. In cases where litigation resulted in depositions and testimony, or where medical records existed, it was relatively easy to verify a woman's story. However, in many instances, the barriers to litigation discussed earlier not only precluded any redress, but

also left on the record only the prison authorities' refusal to investigate allegations of abuse.

Additionally, the women who shared their lives in this volume experienced significant levels of trauma, both before and after their imprisonment. It is well documented that post-traumatic stress disorder, especially when complicated by depression, affects memory. Our narrators have done their best to verify their own memories, but oral history is by its very nature subjective. As the great author and oral historian Studs Terkel wrote in *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*, "This is a memory book rather than one of hard fact and precise statistics... The precise fact or the precise date is of small consequence. This is not a lawyer's brief nor an annotated sociological treatise. It is simply an attempt to get the story from an improvised battalion of survivors."

In contemporary American society, we so often think of people in prison as entirely different from ourselves. When politicians want to gain easy points with voters, they get tough on crime, or on "criminals." This is a population, after all, that is politically disenfranchised. Unlike in other Western countries, individuals convicted of crimes in the United States lose their right to vote not only while imprisoned, but in many cases for the rest of their lives. When considering these individuals' paths to imprisonment, we cannot lay fault solely at their feet. Through failure to address poverty and lack of access to education, through failure to effectively combat domestic abuse and abuse of children, our society fails these women. And then, rather than investing in communities to redress these problems, we instead invest in prisons to warehouse far too many of our people.

Editing this volume has been a great privilege, not only because we are helping to bring to light stories that otherwise might not have been told, but because we were so fortunate to have met these remarkable women. These are women who have forged bonds of community and friendship under the most trying of circumstances. That a feeling

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of community can develop in these circumstances may be surprising to people used to thinking of prisons as only violent and terrifying places. But the women inside do develop warm and loving relationships. They form support groups, such as the Two Spirits group, founded by Charlie Morningstar, for lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. They help one another to survive, and even to flourish, when isolation and despair would have been far more obvious a response. We are grateful to them for their example, for their inspiration, and for the remarkable courage it took to tell their stories.

—*Robin Levi and Ayelet Waldman, 2011*

OLIVIA HAMILTON

25, formerly imprisoned

Olivia lives with her husband and three sons in an apartment that FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) provided for her family because they evacuated New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. We sit at a table in her breakfast nook as she shares her story: abandonment by her mother, teenage pregnancy, forced evacuation from her city, and imprisonment. Olivia gave birth to her youngest son while she was in prison serving a six-month sentence for embezzling money to pay her bills. During the birth, she was chained to an operating table and given a forced and medically unnecessary cesarean section. Olivia gave birth to another child in July 2011, but because of Olivia's c-section in prison, her local hospital was unwilling to allow her to try for a vaginal birth and she was forced to have another c-section. The son she birthed while imprisoned, now three years old, bounds around the apartment wearing only a diaper, occasionally interrupting our interview to squeeze his mother's leg. During the interview, Olivia describes her distrust of both the prison and the healthcare system, and describes her precarious journey toward reestablishing her life post-incarceration.

AND THEN THE HURRICANE HIT

My grandma tells a story about when I was a little girl, that one day I got a broom and started beating my doll with it, saying, "That's what

my mom does.” After that, my mom sent me to live with my grandma in Louisiana, St. Charles Parish. My relationship with my grandma was really good, but she was strict with me.

My brother and sisters stayed in Georgia with my mom. I talked with my mom some, not a lot. I had a lot of resentment, I guess, for her sending me to live with my grandma when I was so young. I think the problems began when I was around twelve. It was never my grades, it was just that I was in trouble with the juvenile detention people all the time for fighting and running away; I was trying everything to get my mom’s attention. I think I realized I was doing it the day I got sent to juvenile hall. Usually I’d just go to the ADAPT Center¹ when I was in trouble, but the last time I ran away, when I was about twelve, I was sent to the St. James Parish Juvenile Detention Center in New Orleans for ten days. I was hurt and mad the day my mama came to see me in juvenile hall. But then I finally realized I shouldn’t be doing all this, and when I went home to my grandmother’s I just got myself back together.

I got pregnant at seventeen, and my boyfriend and I got an apartment together. I had my first son, Emmanuel, when I was a junior in high school, but I still graduated with a 3.8 GPA. I got help. For instance, there was this lady from Africa who’d opened a school for teen moms. She got government funding to open it, and she’d look after the students’ babies, all the way till they were able to go to Head Start.² I didn’t have to bring diapers, food, nothing. All I did was drop him off every day, and that was a blessing.

After I graduated high school in 2004 my then-boyfriend and I headed to Augusta, Georgia, in a raggedy car to live with my mom. But my mom let me down, and six months later I moved back to Louisiana to start all over again. I started Bryman College at the beginning of 2005 and I met my new boyfriend, who is now my husband. And then, that August, Hurricane Katrina hit. Before the storm reached us, I got in a car with my boyfriend

¹ A social work and child resources organization.

² A federal program promoting school readiness for young children (ages three to five) in low-income families by offering educational, nutritional, health, and social services.

and baby, and we started heading toward Georgia. We stayed with a friend of my brother's, which was a hectic situation every day. It was only a two-bedroom apartment, but at least it wasn't a shelter. During that time, I wrote a lot of bad checks because it was hard for me to get a job. I didn't have money for food, and you know, it was just a lot that we were dealing with. It was the only way really at the time that we could get anything.

Eventually I got a job at McDonald's. My brother was working, and my dad was coming up with some money to send us so we could maybe rent a trailer or something. But then three or four weeks after we got out here, I spoke with my mom, and eventually she let us stay with her.

I'D MADE THIS HUGE MISTAKE,
AND I REGRETTED IT

By the end of 2007, I had two kids and was four months pregnant with another. I was living in Marietta, Georgia, and working two jobs, at Kmart and Pep Boys.

Well, one day I got an idea. I had a friend at Kmart who used to do fake refunds. She'd say a customer was coming in and she was refunding stuff that wasn't really being refunded. So I did it the first time and I didn't get caught, but of course I was scared. I said to my friend, "We didn't get caught. Let's not do it again." But we really needed the money. I was behind on a lot of bills, and I was trying to catch it up.

One night, my friend came through my line to check out little items like diapers and different things—some of the things I needed—and I didn't charge her for everything; diapers and stuff like that I would never ring up. We would do that a lot.

That night the Kmart loss prevention officer was outside smoking a cigarette, but I didn't see him at the time. When I got ready to close up, he called me and my friend to the back, and of course they'd caught it on tape. He asked us how long we'd been doing it, and I lied, "This is my first time." And then he basically told me, "Write what I tell you to write, and then I'll let you go home."

I think the total he had us taking was \$1,200 worth of stuff, and I said, "I didn't take that much," because we'd only taken \$300 worth. But he said, "But we have other stuff that's been taken," even though I told him I hadn't taken any of that.

Then he said, "Well, we're gonna press charges." I think he was trying to save his job at the time, 'cause they've got to catch people, and I don't think he'd been doing too good in that department. I got arrested and taken to jail that night, but I bonded out.

About two months later, I got a letter in the mail saying there was an arraignment. I honestly thought it was for Kmart, but when I got to court, I found out it was for Pep Boys—I'd been doing the same thing there. The judge was sending everybody to jail that day, and I was totally scared. So I got up there, and the Pep Boys loss prevention officer said he'd called his manager because he really felt bad for me. He said I was a good worker, and that he knew the situation I was in. He said, "Well, I asked my manager if there's a way that you can make payments, but he's not budging. He says it's too much." It came to something like \$700. The judge put me on a bond on my own recognizance. She basically let me go home that day without my needing to post bail, and told me that I needed to turn myself in the following night. It was like her trusting me that I was going to come back. She said, "I think you made a very bad mistake. I want you to go home, pick your kids up from daycare and make sure they're stable. Tomorrow at nine o'clock, you need to turn yourself in."

In my mind, I was thinking, *Okay, well, I've never been in trouble before, so the only thing they can do is put me on probation.* And that's all I kept saying to myself. But when I finally got to court, I got a court-appointed lawyer, and he said, "Well, the judge is saying eighteen months." And I was like, "Huh? I've never been in trouble before! I can pay the money back!" At the time I had \$1,500 on me, which I'd saved from my taxes. My lawyer talked to the prosecutor, who said, "No. She's got to serve time."

Then my lawyer told me, "Go home for the weekend and get yourself together with your kids." He said, "The only thing I can say is that I'll try

and talk the prosecutor down. Any other judge, and I think you would've been okay. But I don't think she's gonna budge."

So I went home and finally I called my grandmother, my dad, and everybody, and let them know what was going on. Of course they were all shocked, because I had never said anything about it before. That weekend was real, real hard. I was scared, because I didn't want to leave my kids. I guess it just hurt me because I'd never been in trouble, and I was doing all I could to stay out of trouble. But I'd made this huge mistake and I regretted it. I think that was the most that I felt—regret. Leaving my kids—I didn't know how to handle that part.

And so that Monday came, February 18, 2008. I had to be in court at nine. I told my oldest son, "Mommy might have to go away for a while to help some people. But once I've helped them, I'll be home." My husband kept saying, "You're not going. You're not going." When I got to court, every part of me just knew what would happen.

So I got in front of the judge and I said to her, "I'm truly sorry. But you know, I have never been in trouble before this. I just graduated from college and I'm pregnant. This is not what I thought I would be doing right now." The judge had her head down the whole time; she looked real, real sad. And then she said, "The only thing I can say is that I have to send you to jail, because your co-defendant has already gone. But I'm sorry. I think you're on the right track. I think you just made a mistake that you've got to serve the consequences for." I was sentenced to a year, and the judge said, "Hopefully, you'll do six months on good behavior, with nine years' probation." And I thought, *Okay, so you're going to send me to jail. And then I have to pay all this money back—one hundred a month until it's paid back—and then probation for nine years. Nine years.*

THEY SHACKLED MY STOMACH AND MY FEET

When the court bailiff took me from the court to a holding cell in Georgia, a guard put the cuffs around my belly and on my wrists, like a chain. When I sat down, the cuffs were real, real tight, so I was basically stand-

ing up the whole time. For a while, I was complaining about how tight it was, and other inmates were complaining too. Finally the guard came back and loosened the chain around my belly, and then I was able to sit down. The whole process was just long, and I was hungry and tired.

I think the thing that upset me the most was that they wouldn't give me water in a cup. I was not about to drink out of this faucet where you wash your hands; it was right over the toilet bowl. So I just stayed thirsty. By the time I did finally go through the holding cell, the guards gave me a sandwich to eat. Then they took us all on upstairs to the jail, and once I got upstairs, one of the female guards told me, "I won't be able to put you in a bottom bunk until you go see the doctor and he says you're pregnant." I was six months pregnant! I said, "No, for real?! You want me to climb this bunk bed?" She said, "Well, I can't give you a bottom bunk." I just said, "Ma'am, I can't climb this." And then she just walked out. Another inmate told me, "You can have my bed." So she put her stuff on the top bunk, and I took the bottom. And finally I went to sleep.

I was there about a month before I actually saw a doctor. I didn't have vitamins there, and I had no prenatal care. I didn't really complain if I was in pain or anything, because the infirmary was real nasty. There was poo on the walls. It was just nasty. Then one day, when I was seven months pregnant, the guards called me down. They shackled my stomach and my feet and took me to see an OB-GYN. I mean, you walk like this through the front door looking as if you've murdered someone, and I just thought it was really degrading. I know I made a mistake, but I don't think I deserved to be ashamed or embarrassed in this way. And even once I'd got in the back where the actual doctors' offices were, the shackles didn't come off. They took them off my feet, but nothing else; the shackles stayed on my stomach.

The doctor complained that I wasn't getting enough water, vitamins, or fresh fruits, and that it could affect my baby's brain. The county doesn't give you fruits, and it's not like I could buy them. So I just tried to drink as much water as I possibly could.

My kids came to visit me sometimes with my boyfriend. My boys were five and three then. The first time they came was really hard. They were beating on the glass, trying to come through it. I was so mad at myself for putting them through this.

It felt like my pregnancy was the only thing that was keeping me going. I was eight months pregnant when I finally left the county jail and went to prison.

NOBODY CARES IF YOU'RE PREGNANT

When I was moved to prison in Pennsylvania, I couldn't take my books that had been sent to me in jail, or anything like that. I had one picture and I had my Bible, but all the rest I had to send home.

I was taken to prison with other inmates in a cramped, hot van. Some of them were also pregnant. When we got there and were getting off the van, the guards started yelling at us, "Nobody cares if you're pregnant! You shouldn't have got in trouble. You're a sad excuse for a mother. You don't care about your kids!" It was a mess. It was real hard. There was another girl there who was pregnant, and she'd been there before. She said to me, "Don't let them get to you, girl." But they had already gotten to me. I just felt like this wasn't the place I was supposed to be.

The guards wanted me to stand up straight, but I couldn't. I was totally drained because I hadn't slept since three that morning. I was eight months along at this point, and I was huge. Eventually, one of the male guards said, "Okay, go get her a wheelchair." The female guards were actually harder on me. So I got in a wheelchair, and they rolled me on inside. When I got inside, the guards made me strip, bend over, all that. Then they made me take a shower, and afterward they gave me a sandwich and a juice. You would think that they'd give you more food, being pregnant, but they don't. You just eat what everybody else eats.

It was a whole process. I had to learn how to talk to the guards, and that I had to address them with "Ma'am" or "Sir" and "Good morning."

Or when they walked by, I had to stop. I had to ask permission to speak. Finally they gave me all my stuff in a bag to put on the bed.

I couldn't carry the bag like they wanted me to. There's a certain way you had to hold it, a certain way to walk, and I just kept dropping it. It was about ten pounds—it's your clothes, it's everything in there—and I wasn't even supposed to be lifting that. But the guards kept yelling, "You'd better not drop it again!" And I was like, "Uh, ma'am, this is heavy. I'm trying my best."

When I got in the dorm, the inmates were pretty cool and they helped me make my bed. I think, with most of the women in there being mothers, they could imagine how it felt to go through this while pregnant. Most of them were pretty understanding, and they didn't mind helping me out as much as they could.

My family was very supportive. My grandmother made sure that I had money in my account, my dad and uncles too. My mama did most of the writing as far as letters went, and she sent a lot of pictures and just different things to help me get through. I could call my grandma any time, but it was hard for me to call my boyfriend, because you couldn't call cell phones from prison, only landlines. Also, you couldn't get a visitation until about two months of being there. It didn't make any sense for me to even start that process, because my lawyer told me that, nine chances out of ten, I would be getting out in six months. By the time I got to the prison, I'd already been in county jail for two months. I had to wait another two months before I would be allowed visitation at the prison, so it would have been four months by then. And by the time they'd gone through processing everybody, it probably would have been time for me to go home.

I SAID I DIDN'T WANT TO BE INDUCED, AND
THE CAPTAIN SAID, "THESE ARE ORDERS"

My due date was May 24, 2008, just before Memorial Day weekend. A female doctor from the Atlanta Medical Center came to visit me on

the 22nd. At that time, I wasn't showing any signs of labor. We did an ultrasound, and the baby hadn't moved one bit. I wasn't dilated at all, wasn't even close, and I wasn't having any pains. She said I should be fine through the weekend, and that everything was normal about my pregnancy.

Then, on the evening of the 23rd—this was a Friday evening—the guards called me, and they told me to pack my stuff. But I hadn't even had one contraction, so I asked a guard, "Where am I going?" And the guard said, "I don't know. They just called and said for you to pack your stuff." I thought, *Okay, maybe I'm going home!*

I got over to the infirmary, and the captain said, "Well, the doctor from the prison says he's going to send you in to be induced." When I asked why, she said, "Because your due date is May 24th, and this is a holiday weekend." I said, "But I'm not even in pain or anything! I don't want to be induced, I'm not even late. Nothing's wrong with me!" And she said, "Well, these are orders."

They put me in a room and shackled me. I was more upset than anything that the baby just wasn't ready, and I didn't want to be forced. They gave me Pitocin,³ but it wasn't working. Later, in the middle of the night, the doctor came in to check on me. He came in and he started poking inside me with an instrument—I'm not sure exactly what it was, it looked like a little stick. He put it inside me and started poking the bag of water, where the amniotic fluid was, so he could bust it. It was a lot of pain, and I said, "You're hurting me." He stopped, but by then he had swollen up my insides, and the baby wouldn't move any more than six centimeters.

Then he said, "Well, if you don't move any more by tomorrow, we're going to have to do a c-section." I said, "So you come in here, and you poke me to death, and now I'm swollen! I have never had a c-section in my life. My oldest son was nine pounds—no cuts, no slits, no nothing. And you're going to make me have a c-section?"

³ Pitocin is an intravenous medication commonly used to induce labor.

The next day, the doctor came back and took me in to have the c-section done. A sergeant came in and said, “She needs to be shackled. She’s no different from anybody else.” I was hurting, and I was tired. I said to the sergeant, “Ma’am, there is no way I need these shackles. I’m not going anywhere; I’m in pain. You’ve got a guard in my room. And I don’t know if you have kids, but this ain’t something fun to have your hands shackled for.” But she made them keep the shackles on me when I went in for the c-section.

The doctor gave me an epidural. I went through with the c-section, and finally, the baby came on out. It was a boy. The guard held him up to show him to me. Even then, they never took the shackles off me.

This c-section I was forced to have—I doubt that it’s legal. I don’t remember signing any paperwork, but I never looked into finding a lawyer. I was hoping there was something I could do, but I was told that I had no rights. The guard said to me, “You lost your rights the day you walked in here.”

I named the baby Joshua. I wonder about him; does he remember all that we went through? The guards made me put the prison address on the birth certificate. That’s something you have to deal with for the rest of your life.

I was fortunate, you know. One of the guards there gave me her cell phone because she didn’t agree with a lot of what was going on. She said, “Call your boyfriend. Let him know you had the baby.” She let me talk to him until the phone died. It was a blessing.

IT FELT LIKE MY BABY WAS DYING

After I left the hospital, my boyfriend picked up the baby and took him home. I guess for me, walking out of that hospital, knowing I was leaving my son—it killed me inside. I felt like I was being punished for the one mistake that I’d made in my life. I just remember looking at my baby, and kissing him, and crying, and not wanting to go. The nurse who was holding him was really hurt too. She asked me, “Do you

want to kiss him again?” And I kissed him one last time, and they took me out the door.⁴

It felt like my baby was dying, that I was abandoning him. I felt like I owed it to him to be there, and I wasn't. I felt like maybe he would hate me, or resent me, or when I got home, he wouldn't know who I was. It hurt. It just hurt.

I got back to the prison with staples in because of the c-section. But I couldn't go back to the dorm until the staples came out, and so, on top of me being hurt and stressed, they put me in this infirmary with nothing but four walls. I didn't have any of my personal property, and there was no TV, nothing.

I was supposed to stay there through the weekend. During that time, I had nobody to talk to, and all I could really do was cry. I didn't want to eat, I didn't want to do anything. And then one of the guards told me, “Well, if you don't eat, we're going to make you stay here longer.” So I made myself eat because I didn't want to stay in there that long. All that was going to do was drive me more crazy than I already was.

By then I was mad at everything. I was mad at myself. I was mad at my mom. I was mad at everybody. I had only been back there but about five weeks from the hospital, and I got in a fight. It was with a girl who was looking for trouble, and she picked a fight with me one night. She hit me and hit me, and I fought her back. So of course, they took us to

⁴ Most prisons separate parents and their new-born infants after 48 hours. As well as causing emotional distress, the separation of mothers and their children also threatens the health of infants by posing serious barriers to breastfeeding. The Fifth Circuit of Appeals ruled in the 1981 case *Dike v. School Board of Orange County, Florida*, that the right to nurse is protected by the Fourteenth Amendment. However, the same court determined in *Southerland v. Thigpen* that the state could overlook this guarantee in prison. Some states, like New York, have taken steps to recognize the universality of this right, guaranteeing women in prison the ability to breastfeed their children for a year after birth, though in other states the reality of prison life has rendered breastfeeding impossible.

In at least thirteen states, babies can be placed in prison nurseries, though access is often limited to women with short sentences for non-violent offenses, and some parents prefer for their children to be raised outside prison walls.

lockdown. That's the worst place to be. I mean, you can't look out the windows because they're all blacked out, and you can only bathe on certain days. I was down there for three weeks. My birthday was July 18th, and I was in lockdown for that. But my mom sent me a whole bunch of cards and pictures, and I would call my grandma, and she'd be like, "You still down there?" And I'd say, "Yes."

The day I got out of lockdown was the day I got the news that I was going home on August 14. I had two weeks left! I thought, *Thank God! Finally!* I stayed up the whole night before the 14th—I was so excited, and I just wanted to leave. I was just so ready to get out of there.

ALL STORMS END

When I got out of prison, my boyfriend came to get me. At that time, his mom had the two younger kids and my grandmother had my oldest son. It took me a while to get the kids back. I missed them terribly, but things were bad. The gas in the house had been turned off, the phone was off, the cable was off. The truck I had was gone, and my credit was totally messed up. Everything was in a total wreck. I couldn't be bringing the kids back into that type of situation. I wanted to be able to have food stamps first, and I wanted to try to get the house together. It was nasty, it was dirty. I was just in a depressed situation, and I was upset with my boyfriend, who wasn't working at that time. I was mad because I'd left him with \$1,500, and he got money every month from my dad and my grandmother, so I couldn't understand the house being in a total wreck when I got out of prison. I was totally mad about my money, and why everything was gone. I also felt a lot of resentment toward society.

Eventually, I was able to get a job at the food court. I saved up, and I got a car. Once I got the car, I could get back and forth to work. And finally, when we were more financially stable, we got the kids back.

Once I got out, I got in the church. I always was in church, but I strayed for a while when I first moved out here to Georgia. But once

I got out of prison, I joined a choir and I went to Bible study and Sunday school. And, you know, I got myself back together for me and God. For me and school. For me and work.

Eventually I got laid off from the food court because they didn't have enough work for me, and it's been totally hard for me to find a job since. Whenever I'm filling out a job application, I get scared when I get to that question where I have to put down that I have this conviction. I feel like I'll never have the opportunity to explain what happened. So it's like, do you lie, or do you tell the truth? And, you know, every time I get to that question, I stumble.

I think my medical treatment in prison was cruel, degrading, and shameful. Being shackled, being forced to have that c-section—it was the worst feeling, mentally and emotionally, that I have ever been through. And I feel like it would be so unfair for me to have been through all this and not say anything about it to somebody. I always felt like everything I went through was definitely for a reason, and that it made me a stronger person. So my goal now is to help prevent somebody else from making the same mistakes, with the stealing, the whole scenario. Right now I'm working with young women through my church. I want to work with these young women because when you get to a certain age, there are things you go through, there's pressure to do things that you may not want to do. I've also been without a mom, and I know how it feels to want that. There's a gap in your heart where you need it. A grandmother's love is awesome, but a mom's love is something totally different.

Through God, all things are possible. Even though I was mad at my boyfriend and my mom, God has built those relationships again. Now my mom and I share a beautiful relationship, and my boyfriend is now my husband. This shows that all storms end and the sun will shine again.

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