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Revolving Doors

I became a single mother at the age of 16 and had every reason to be the best mother in the world...

Six weeks after giving birth I began to work, because I knew my goal of successful motherhood would be a long journey. Within three years, my life changed when my son's father took a lot of chances doing things that would put our family in jeopardy. My mom told me on several occasions to leave him, and I eventually moved back home with my mother. A year later, I had my own place. It made me work harder and longer hours to pay for rent, food, child-care, and transportation. There were many nights I cried because of the long struggle ahead. A single mother faces many challenges.

One day, just when I was about to give up, the man of my life appeared. He told me that he could help me double my income, and he kept his word. The only downside? I was afraid of jail and death. My finances began to look good, and I could provide for my son. After I became stable and self-sufficient, I made the decision that I no longer needed him. But he didn't see it that way. The police kicked my door down when I wasn't home, and waited until I returned. They showed me the warrant and told me I had 72 hours to turn myself in. I was fingerprinted, photographed, and booked. I went in front of the judge and got probation for one year. I lost my job and most of my savings were gone. My mind began to work. I told myself that I could get even more money if I worked full-time at what I had learned—hustling. So, instead of working a 9 to 5 job, and hustling on the side, hustling became my job. I could just transport drugs. It meant making more trips out of town, but I could provide for my son, so that's what I did. It worked for a while, then I violated my probation and got a new charge.

What hurt most was that my son was right there when the police handcuffed me and walked me out. As we approached the police car, my son said, "Please Mr. Police, let my mommy go!" He dropped to his knees and held onto the officer's leg, begging that he let me go. The tears broke from my eyes like a waterfall, and I began to scream for someone to get my son. One of the people watching grabbed him. Once I was in the car, he began to beat on the car window.

The car began to move and he moved with it. He was only six years old, but that was when my son became a man.

When I could no longer see his face from the police car's back window, I truly felt like killing myself. But, my six-year-old son didn't give up. He said when he could no longer see me, he talked to the man I was dealing with, then walked home, and called his grandmother. When she arrived, he had his bags packed but refused to leave until he was sure his mama was alright. The next morning, when I was escorted into the courtroom, the first faces I saw were my son's and my mom's. When the lawyer said I wouldn't be going home, my son told me he loved me and that he'd be with his grandmother and not to worry. I was glad the judge gave me the chance to hug and kiss him.

For three long weeks I sat in lockdown waiting to be medically cleared. The only time I was let out of my cell was for ten minute phone calls and to shower; every other day. Scared wasn't the word for what I was feeling. On the day I got cleared, I had to report to the infirmary. While sitting there, one of the nurses told me someone wanted to talk with me. She took me to the back and out stepped my younger brother. The last time I'd seen him was in Lorton Youth Center, right after I had my son.. I asked, "What are you doing here?" He told me he was too old for the youth center, but they were not ready to put him on the Big Lorton side yet. So they housed him at the D.C. jail. After we talked, he gave me the rules for being a fish and told me who to talk to if I had a problem.

My first day in open population I broke rule #1: Don't Stare. I could not get over the fact that everyone had starched uniforms, new tennis shoes, shorts and tee-shirts, and I was sitting there looking like a homeless person. I didn't have to find the girl my brother told me about, she found me, and I was glad because already I'd broken the rules. She showed me around. My first makeover was getting my hair done, then getting a job in the laundry, because they worked at night and I was used to sleeping during the day. That's when I got my starched uniform. Then, I put in a clothing slip and my family mailed in my clothes. The year I sat on the probation violation, I learned the prison life and waited for holidays to come around so I could see my son.

While waiting to get sentenced on my new charge, I changed jobs. Working in the kitchen, I could move around more. Working on the line was so much fun. Men and women worked together. The police and foremen were cool, so I lived on going to the kitchen, even on my days off.

Once I got sentenced on my new charge, which was 1-3 years, I could see the light of day. After ten months of that, I saw the parole board and got an 18 month setoff. All during that time, I stayed in touch with my son and made a lot of promises.

I was released to the halfway house where I had to stay for seven days. Then I got a four-hour pass followed by 14 days to find a job. Halfway House

means that you are halfway in and halfway out of jail. The halfway house did everything the jail did: count times, shakedown, piss tests and breathalyzers. Should you fail any of them, the doors would all be locked and the jail van would be there to transport you back to jail.

I had a hard time finding a job; no one wanted an ex-con with a felony. So on my last day, my counselor told me that if I didn't get a job that day I would have to go to a telemarketing job the next morning through a contract with the halfway house. I asked, "Well, what happens if you don't sell anything?" The answer: you only get minimum wage, which then was like \$2.50.

When I got my pass I already knew I wasn't coming back. I went straight down to the block. I was getting weight with everybody. My mind told me my son and mom didn't have to know I was on the run. For a whole year I played the role, but my mom needed to be sure that things were right before she would let my son live with me. I got a place away from the 'hood and she began to let me have him on the weekends. Then one morning, 5 a.m. to be exact, someone was pounding on the door. I got the gun and answered the door. Now that was odd: It was my mom. I guess she didn't really trust me yet. When I opened the door, she stepped in and smacked me so hard I saw stars. She asked me why I lied to her and to my son, of all people. I couldn't say anything. She walked past me to the bedroom where my son slept, picked him up and left my place. I just stood there dumbstruck.

I called my mom later that day and she explained that I had put my aunt's address and number on one of my passes and the authorities checked and called her house. My aunt was a crossing guard, a job she'd had forever. So, when they surrounded her home, looking for me, she called my mom to let her know I'd escaped from the halfway house and had been on the run for a year. I knew the police would be at my door soon. My mom's last words to me were that I needed some help and if I didn't do it for myself, at least do it for my son. Then she hung up on me.

A week later, they got me. I was riding with someone who I knew was hot. It seemed that no sooner had I gotten in that car, the police were on me. Once they ran my name, it was a done deal. Not only was I facing up to five years for escape, but the guy I was with had just served an undercover cop. So, you know what happened: We both got the charge.

Once again, I'm sitting in jail waiting to get medically cleared. Mind you, I'm back to the song and dance and my son is believing me, but my mom's not hearing it. Then I'm back on the same unit I left. Just a different cell. Nothing had changed but the foremen I worked for in the kitchen. When they found out I was back, they moved me to the Officer's Dining Room and that's where I went to work.

I knew my mom was trying her best to get my son not to think of me, but

we were close. I called regularly and ran up the phone bill. Then, my mom's phone got cut off, so all I could do was write. They dropped the escape charge but gave me 4-12 years for the drugs. During those years, working in the kitchen and writing my son were all I knew. I also found out that my son had high blood pressure.

When they opened up a treatment center next to the jail because it had become overcrowded at D.C. jail, they moved me to the new building, and my foreman called over and told them they had the best cook they could have. I began as the First Cook for the Officer's Dining Room. I answered to no one but my boss. I planned all meals, pulled what I needed for the day, and on special days, made a home cooked meal.

When Mayor Marion Barry was elected, he came to tour the Central Treatment Facility. The Second Cook and I had to come to work at 3 a.m. to prepare food for this big affair. After we'd done that, the foreman picked three helpers. While she was doing that, the Second Cook and I began to season the chicken and cut vegetables. Once the foreman got back, I would start on the baked goods. After I prepared my meats, I went to fill the deep fryer, but someone had used it before my shift began and it was greasy. Time was short, but I had to clean it first. Not trying to cut corners, I heated the deep fryer and once I saw the grease was melting, I began to scoop the unmelted oil out. Then, I put it in an old grease barrel. The floor was slippery, so I put down old boxes after I used degreaser to clean the floor. I reached for the hot power hose to clean the fryer, but nothing came out but cold water. My foreman said, "This is what you do. Get a pot, fill it with hot water from the coffee machine." I was mad because we were falling behind schedule, but I did as I was told. As I was carrying my second pot of water, I felt my foot slip out from under me. My boss and two other inmates were standing with their back to me, so I screamed, "Move!" When they turned around, they froze, and to keep from throwing the pot with boiling water on them, I tried to bring it over my shoulder. As I fell, the pot of hot water went with me.

Over 65% of my body was burned: 1st, 2nd and 3rd degree. I was rushed to D.C. General Hospital. On my way out, the Chief of Security came in. He took my hand and asked if I had another emergency contact. My mom's phone was cut off and for the last two years I'd just been writing my son, so I could only give my aunt's phone number, and my aunt contacted my brother and sister-in-law. Eventually, my sister-in-law contacted the Sheriff's Department in Mineral, VA. Once she told them that it was an emergency, they dispatched a car to my mom's house.

My brother left work and came to the hospital. When he came into my room, tears began to fall. He had no idea that I had been hurt so badly. All you could see of my face was eyes. Everything else was bandaged.

The officer watching over me had my brother identify himself, and they allowed him ten minutes. He later told me that he never made it to the lobby before he called my mom and broke down. They agreed they would not tell my son because they had just begun to control his high blood pressure and were afraid this would set it off. I stayed in the hospital for four weeks. Then they put me on the hospital ward at the Central Treatment Facility. While there, a lot of things happened. Everything happens for a reason.

I don't know whether it was prayers from my family or God stepping in, but I began to feel differently about things. Not only had I totally messed up my life, but I was bringing those along who loved me. It was like—snap—and the words my mom spoke to me came loud and clear: "Get yourself together girl. If you don't do it for yourself than do it for you son. It's not too late."

While on the medical unit I prepared myself. I wrote to the drug program they had in the building. Two weeks before I was to return back to population, I got a visit from my mom and aunt. Even though it had been two years since I saw my son, my mom hadn't brought him. I'd been hurt, was still locked up, but my mom wasn't hearing what I was saying. All she wanted were actions. She no longer cared about the money or the gifts I had given her. When she left I was at rock bottom. She left me her new number, but said only to call once a month because she could not afford the cost.

Once I was released from the medical unit, I still had a few bandages and none of the jobs off the unit wanted me. So I had a lot of time to think. The drug program had yet to interview me and I'd given up on them doing so. I began to do what I do best, hustle. This time it was hustling my medication. I had a lot of it and people were willing to buy it. I think God had other plans, though, because within two months, the drug program came to interview me at 8:30 a.m. in the morning. By 2:30 p.m. that same day, I was moved to D building, which housed the drug program. That was the beginning of change for me. The rocky road ahead was my longest and most difficult journey.

Our day began at 5:30 a.m. with exercising until 6 a.m. Then you showered and had to be in the satellite kitchen by 6:30 a.m. Affirmation was at 7 a.m. and by 7:30 a.m. everyone went to school or vocational class. Those who didn't have classes would sit in group, or the unit, which was led by a different counselor each morning. When you came into the program there were rules to be followed. The first 30 days you were not allowed to watch TV or have a Walkman. Each newcomer had a big sister and the motto was, 'We are our sister's keeper.' I got the hot seat a lot because I just couldn't get the fact that what I did reflected on all of us. I was never a follower, so I just kept stepping on toes. Then there were marathons that could last up to 48 hours where you grouped for hours, maybe slept two hours and group would start again. I mean they worked on you, and, believe me, I had a lot of things to work on. When

it came time for therapy with my mom and son, my mom would say she was not coming, or just not show up. I'd blow up and we would have a group session, because I would throw things in my room and snap on people who only tried to help. My sisters would break me down to tears, then build me back up again.

Two years into the program, I began a vocational class called Graphic Arts, and, to my surprise, I liked what I did. I learned many things I could use once I was released. One of my main concerns was being an ex-con, but in that field of work I thought it wouldn't go against me. I prepared my resume, went to job fairs and got a few interviews that went very well. I was getting close to doing my halfway house package and I had a lot of fear about how that might go. However, I received one-on-one counseling, and my counselor was able to help me a lot.

Then one day, after outside recreation group my counselor called me into the office to tell me that Emergency Power Act (in response to overcrowding in jails) had come into effect and that I was being released immediately. I was scared to death; because, even though I had plenty of places I could go, I knew these places would only bring me trouble. I called my mom. My heart thumped with each ring of the phone because I'd already made my one allowed phone call that month. I said, "Mom, they are putting me out." She said, "So, you're going to stay in the halfway house this time?" I responded, "No, I'm being released from jail to go home. I must report to the parole office within 24 hours."

Now, the four years I stayed in the program, my mom and I were on shaky ground, and I had no reason to believe she would come and get me. The officers walked me to the gate and left me outside. One hour passed. I had no money and still did not know if anyone was coming to get me. While I was standing there, one of the drug counselors came out and asked, "You haven't left yet?" I said, "I don't have a ride." He said, "Well, I have to do an errand, but when I get back, I'll give you ride." When he got back I was still there. We started packing my bags into the car. As I put the last bag in, three officers came running out of control, screaming into their radios to the guard at the gate, "STOP HER!"

I was ready to run, because all I could think was that they made a mistake and were about to lock me back up. The guard must have read my thoughts because he blocked my path. Once they got close to me, I could see that they were Lieutenants. They asked, "Are you Smith?" I said, "Yes, why?" They explained that my mother had just called from her mobile phone and was on her way. I could not stop the hot tears from rolling down my face. I took the bags out of the counselor's car and sat down on them to wait the three hours for my mother to arrive.

Mama's tires were screaming when she turned around that corner. She slammed on the brakes and jumped out of the car. We hugged, then began to

put my bags in the car. While riding, she asked me what was wrong. I asked, "What made you come?" Mama said, "I know I've been hard on you, but I knew that if I didn't come, my grandson would never forgive me for not giving you a chance, and God told me that if I didn't save you now, I'd lose you forever." I could see the tears building in the corners of her eyes. The next morning, I reported to the parole officer. We both sat while he explained what he expected of me while I was on parole. My mom interrupted him and asked, "So, you telling me she has to stay here in D.C. until you can transfer her parole to Virginia?" He stated yes, so she asked for his boss and told me not to say a word. When his boss came in, she got right to the point. She told him who she was and that she would be responsible for me being here when they needed to see me, but she was not leaving me there in Washington, D.C., not for one minute. "If I leave my daughter here," she said, "she'll be locked up next week, and I refuse to let that happen". We signed some papers and I went home with my mom.

When I got home, my son had no idea I was coming. So when we pulled up in the yard, my mom placed her hand over mine and said to wait. She called on the phone and told my son to come out and help her with the bags. I could hear the voice of a man, "Aw, Grandmom!" When he came out of that door I could not believe what I was seeing. He swung the door open and screamed, "Mama," taking my breath away.

Later that night, we sat on his bed talking about what I was going to do. Then out of nowhere, he said, "I can tell you exactly what you were going to do," and pulled out this box of letters I'd written to him over an eleven-year period. Some of the letters had turned yellow. At that point, he began to read to me those letters. I tried not to cry but I couldn't hold it in. He put his arm around me and told me it was all right. I couldn't believe how much I had missed of his life.

The next day I began to look for a job. The Graphic Arts I learned while in prison landed me a job paying top dollar. Once I got my first check, I put down my security deposit on a house. I needed to take charge of my life and I worked overtime to make it possible.

When my son and I moved into the house, I worked the 4 to 11 p.m. shift, so I usually made dinner before I left home so my son would have something to eat. On the days when I worked two shifts, he'd cook dinner for me. He'd pick me up from work and if he couldn't get a ride, I'd catch a cab home.

There were days that I had only enough for transportation after paying my bills, but my mom showed me how to budget my money. She said that you needed to pamper yourself too, so when you get paid you would not feel that you only worked to pay the bills. I can say that helped me a lot and kept me out of trouble for three years.

I'd never been off the street for that long a period of time. Even though I didn't think of the drug game, I was still drawn to the fast life and that is what brought me back to prison.

It seems that I could not stay away from bad people or places, so that brought me right back to jail. I could have stayed out but my son came looking for me. The police got him. So I did what any mother who let her child down time and time again should have done. I stepped up to the plate. I knew my son would never make it in jail. He was a good boy. Me, I could do it. Doing time had become second nature to me. A revolving door, just like it was for my brother.

On the day of my sentencing, my son asked if I was sure this was what I wanted and I told him yes. At that point, he said, "Mama, I couldn't be there for you before but I will be there for you now."

I received 88 months. My son, mama and daughter in law have walked each of these months with me. They have been there for me. I have three grandkids who love me and are waiting for their grandmother to come home.

For me, jail used to be fun. You could do everything you did on the street, I thought, but drive a car. I've been doing time all my adult life; but these 88 months have been the hardest time I've ever done. I'm 41 years old and will be 43 when I get released. I'm finished. I can't do this anymore. I don't want to. No more revolving doors for me. The people coming in are getting younger and younger. Money is tight and the budget is not allowing women that are in prison to get much training. You have some women who never learned to read or write, let alone spell, who are afraid to let anyone know because their streets smarts have gotten them by this long. All I can say is, 'Pray for Us.'

Maybe a few of us may never make it, but we do have a chance to write our own ending to life. Just because the judge sentenced us to time, it does not mean we have to give up. There will always be a place for each and every one of us.

Stand proud 'cause you will get your chance one day.