

The eve of my son's fifth birthday seemed especially cruel. I'm sure he woke up excited and happy to celebrate his special day, only to find that his father was gone. I can't imagine how my wife, six months pregnant with our daughter, managed to find the words to tell him.

The party arrangements were done, the cake safely stashed, we'd confirmed who would attend and even had a few bucks left over. That evening friends were playing in a band at a local bar. Maybe everything was just too right not to go wrong. Most bar fights don't end in death. Mine did. And suddenly everything changed. My loved ones had to live in the wreckage I left behind. This was clear in the eyes of my son.

When my family brought him to our first visit a month later, he had dark rings around his eyes as though he'd been crying the whole time. His haunted, frightened look ground salt into my pain. He lunged to meet me, hugging tight. His skin was hot, feverish, and he didn't let go after the initial greeting. I searched for an answer to his unspoken plea for an explanation. The small, unadorned visiting room was crowded and seemed to close in upon us. I found no answer in the water-stained ceiling, the pale yellow cinder-block walls, the speckled concrete floor. I just held him, fighting back my own emotions. Maintaining a front grew harder as the visit continued. My voice threatened to break. I managed to ask about his He-Man Castle Grayskull birthday present—fun to assemble but tricky to wrap. I'd imagined watching him play out each character's role. We didn't get the chance to share that birthday, or any since. Some things cling and won't let go—like his hug, and how I had to pry his tiny hands apart when the visit ended.

Prison has extracted pieces of all of us. Happy childhoods. Bonds between brother and sister. My son went to live with an uncle in another state. My daughter, who I've held only a few times as an infant, stayed with her mother. The logic may have been sound, but it wasn't mine. My children were split up to grow under others' guidance without my nurturing. I didn't appreciate it then, but they were fortunate to have family looking after them. They would be loved, have a home, and were spared being thrust into foster care.

None of us saw the stigma they'd endure. Schoolchildren can be mean. As a convict's kid, there is no acceptable answer to "What does your daddy do?" Sporting events, musicals, any public outing where parents normally appear scarred my children, who had to cover the truth to their peers. They learned shame and how to lie. They grew thick skins to shield them from the abuse. Laughter isn't joyful when it's aimed at you. It shaped their views of the world, and determined who they associated with and ultimately who they became. They saw the pecking order from the bottom and had to fight to fit in where they could. They migrated to the misfit groups.

Drug use became abuse. Maybe it dulled the pain, maybe it enabled them to socialize. In either case, it brought more trouble than they could handle. Through no fault of their own, they grew up experiencing prison secondhand. As if that wasn't bad enough—what weighs upon me now—both went to prison themselves. "Visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and fourth generations..." So the pattern is set for the third generation: they too suffer a parent in prison and bear the

marks. It's said that people are responsible to carry their own cross. I bear the weight of how my children turned out.

When the judge's gavel slammed like a lightning bolt from above, my family was sentenced too, the consequences piling on with each passing year. As I've learned, so my children have learned to question everyone's motives. It's a kneejerk reflex with every relationship. People abandon convicts. There are so many hardships, few survive the distance a bid demands. These facts twist a convict's psyche, making us less likely to reach out, trust, or even begin new relationships. My children will learn to keep others at a distance. All that I've experienced will be passed on.

For over a decade, my son believed that I did not love him. My daughter had her first child at fifteen. Neither finished high school. Treasured moments in their childhoods never became memories of mine. My triumphs were never theirs. They didn't share their first bike rides with their father, or fishing trips, or Easter egg hunts, Sunday morning pancakes shaped like elephants, or even the mumps. Decorating the Christmas tree, who lifted them to place the star? Did they miss me at tea parties? Who patched up their skinned knees or built their tree forts? Was the very thought of me so painful that they built a wall to keep it hidden? Was I a traveling companion on adventures into lost worlds, or was I the enemy they rallied the troops against? I never met the people they loved. My grandchildren, all born out of wedlock, never met their grandfather.

Both my children went to prison when their children were young—so repeats the cycle that I started. No doubt they too have learned the anguish of restricted space, resources, and actions. They will have no careers, no pension plans, and college is out of the equation.

My brother wrote a while back. He told me to sit down because he had really terrible news. Two of my daughter's three children had been killed in a house fire. I sat stunned. I wondered how my daughter received the news in her cell. Did her hands shake like mine? Did she utter prayers to reverse time? No doubt, her distress is much greater than mine. I'm sure it's killing her to be caged while her remaining child is in such need.

I had no way to contact her before the funeral. Maybe she tried to reach me... maybe not. I would not have been allowed to attend anyway. I wonder whether I would have been welcome. I'd never met them. I fear she didn't consider me worthy to grieve with her.

I still don't know the details of the fire. I only hope I can learn where they were buried, to pay my respects, and place a few flowers.

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