

Hidden Voices:

Can of Coke and a Packet of Jaffa Cakes



The first time my dad was in prison, I was about five. My only memories are of a day trip on the train, being in a big room with tables and chairs where grown-ups chatted and having fun in a play area drawing pictures.

I was fourteen when the police did their early door knock; Dad was arrested and taken to the police station and our home was searched. Every room, every cupboard, nothing left untouched, my bedroom included. No one spoke to me, I got the day off school and Dad came home later, we sat and had dinner and that was that.

Hushed conversations were commonplace in the following months, accompanied by silence when I walked into rooms. I knew Dad would be going to court, but I was assured all would be fine and not to worry. The trial went on for a few weeks and he was found guilty. The atmosphere at home was tense as the sentencing day neared, but Mum said not to worry, so I didn't. I asked to go to the sentencing, I wanted to be there, but they wouldn't let me, it was not a place for a child, I was fifteen! I know now that they were just trying to protect me, but it didn't protect me, it still happened, and I felt pushed out, I didn't understand what was happening and I was alone.

The following memory is burned into my soul; it is still very raw and physically hurts when I think about it. On the day of sentencing, I went to London for the day with friends. Early evening I got off the bus and headed home. Walking up the road towards me was my big brother, he must have been watching out the window waiting for me to get home (this was pre-mobile days, so he must have been stood for hours!). We met halfway between the bus stop and home and he told me Dad had been sentenced to four years, he then wrapped me in his arms and we wept for what felt like a lifetime.

For many years, I thought that if perhaps the Judge had seen me in court that he wouldn't have given Dad the maximum sentence available to him, after all, why would you send a man with children to prison. I didn't understand because no one explained anything, confusion and anger remained at a system that didn't care about my family or me.

Life then went on; we needed to try to act normally, to keep up a pretence to the neighbours and society. I went to school, but no one talked about it. Not one single schoolteacher ever spoke to me about my dad being in prison or asked me if I was OK.

I have never been embarrassed or ashamed of my dad; I just wanted him to come home. Nevertheless, I do feel that society judged me for his wrongdoing, as children with a parent in prison we are forgotten, invisible.

It was just me and my Mum at home; my brother had left and got his own place. My Mum worked hard, she kept the business going, kept the house in order and paid the bills. We argued, a lot, I regularly screamed at her that I hated her. I still try to forgive myself for this and still apologise to her for it. I was riddled with anger and grief and found it impossible to express those feelings except through screaming. She was nothing short of extraordinary in her strength and courage, but she was in survival mode, and it has taken a huge toll on her mental and physical health since. Not one single professional asked her if she was OK and if she needed any help.

Whilst Dad was in prison my brother became part of the intergenerational cycle of crime, whereby 65% of sons of prisoners end up in the criminal justice system. At one stage, both my dad and Brother were in prison at the same time. This time is just a blur in my memory, too painful to recall. We just needed to survive.

I told you earlier that my first prison visits seemed fun, the second time I hated. I could write a separate blog just on visiting prisons, they were all terrifying for their own reasons ... Wormwood Scrubs, Leyhill, Grendon, Oxford. I missed my dad terribly, but I hated going to see him. They always had a place you could get a drink and I found routine in having a can of coke and a packet of Jaffa Cakes. Each visit I felt that I was intruding on his time with Mum, I never knew what to say, I would look around the room at the other prisoners and I was scared for Dad. He told me when he was in the Scrubs that his job was sewing mailbags and he could earn 3p for each one, I wanted to cry, but didn't want him to see that. As the months went on and he moved around prisons, I would find excuses not to visit, stomach upsets, friend's parties, and homework. I knew it upset my Mum and Dad, but I just found them too difficult, but I couldn't find the words to tell them so just kept on making excuses.

It was GCSE time, and I tried my best to study. My attendance was poor, and I was not academically gifted, no one asked why I missed so much school. Somehow, I managed to get Cs in most of my exams and went into sixth form. I lasted a few months and left, I'd had enough of school, no one cared anyway, no one asked why I was leaving, I just stopped going. Since leaving school I have always worked, my dad has always worked hard and so that ethic was passed on. Initially I flitted from job to job and had no idea what I wanted to do; I don't think anyone had any expectations of me achieving anything.

One day my Mum mentioned a role that she thought I would be good at. I have always cared about people and thought I would like to make a difference, so I filled in an application and was accepted for the course.

Dad was released after serving just over two years. Life returned to normal quickly, he went back to work. I struggled at home and didn't feel like I fitted in anymore. I had met someone, and we talked about moving in together. When I was eighteen, I moved out and then went to college.

College was hard, I was good at the practical side, but academically poor and I struggled with the written assignments. The boy I moved in with changed my life. He never judged me; he knew our family history, but it didn't matter. He encouraged me to succeed, he 100%

believed in ME. He taught me how spell and use grammar correctly and because of him I went on to pass and had a great career. A few years later, I was the luckiest girl on the planet and got to marry this boy and we are nearing 30 years together. It hasn't always been easy, I can be difficult to be around, I am an introvert, although many would never know. I have dark moments, anger, sadness, and terrible imposter feelings, but he is always there, always my rock and his belief in me is unwavering.

After ten years I changed careers, despite loving what I was doing, I felt compelled by the opportunity to make a real difference to people's lives. Upon moving roles, I have experienced enormous satisfaction as well as endless trauma. For every success, others end in desperate sadness. The people I work with are the most extraordinary people you will ever meet; they see things daily that most people never see in a lifetime and I am truly grateful to every one of them for what they do and have been blessed with some lifetime friendships.

Today I hold a senior management position within my organisation; I was humbled to have been selected for my most recent role. It is everything I have worked for and it is a position where I can truly make a difference to others. I have worked relentlessly to get to where I am and have had to sit many exams and interviews. Life has never handed me anything, why should it, so I have worked hard to achieve my successes.

Life for me today is good; I have a wonderful relationship with my parents. My big brother, despite being a statistic, has worked incredibly hard, has a beautiful home and a wonderful family and we have the closest of bonds. All of our children are happy and successful, we broke the cycle and for that, I am grateful. I can count my close friends on one hand. Recently I needed to have trauma counselling for PTSD, you cannot see my scars, but they are there, and I have finally learned how to manage some of the memories and feelings.

However, whilst life for me is good, I know for others it isn't. Having a parent in prison is devastating and still in this country children with a parent in prison go unrecognised, hidden from society. We did not commit the crimes, we suffer loss and trauma and still no one comes, it is lonely and frightening. Over the past few days, with sadness, I have read about Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and him 'slipping through the net'. The Government are calling for a review to highlight the failings and why there was a lack of coordination and data sharing.

Mr Johnson, it is time to get your house in order. The Government continue to fail children with parents in prison. Children should be on the radar of public services with professionals checking in with families, ensuring needs are identified and met, targeting support to those most at risk. We need to ensure charities such as Children Heard and Seen, who were set up to mitigate the effects of parent imprisonment on children, young people and their families are properly funded. Their superb work consequently will reduce the likelihood of generational offending, mental health issues and family breakdown through direct support for families and professionals who work with them. My family and I needed help such as this, it is time for change.