

Hidden Voices:

Caron's Story



I never seemed to have the depth of childhood memory that many adults have: it intrigued me when people talked of early recollections of parties or events, playing with siblings or remembering conversations with long gone relatives. I thought this was just because I have a poor memory when it comes to my childhood, but recently a conversation with someone unconnected made me stop and think about why I might not want to remember in detail.

I do recall my 7th birthday, because that was when my dad went to court and started his first custodial sentence. I have a strong suspicion he had been 'in trouble' before. I remember being with my favourite aunt and small sister, having a knickerbocker glory in Wimpys whilst we waited for Mum, Dad, and Nan to come home. Dad didn't, clearly. That was my earliest memory of the whispered conversations, tears, stoic expression on my Nan's face, Mum crying, being told that Daddy was away for a while 'with work', words like 'court', 'appeal' and 'remand'.

'He never hurt anyone'. I was told that so many times I believed it and said it myself - until I was old enough to think for myself and realized that yes, physically my father had 'never hurt anyone' - but he certainly did in other ways. My dad's crimes were so-called 'white collar'. He took other people's money by being dishonest. He was a conman, a thief, a devious and unscrupulous man according to one judge, the subject of sensationalist or disapproving news reports and angry missives. Starting with my 7th birthday, I believe there were six and possibly seven custodial sentences, all for similar crimes, right up until his last release in 2017. My Dad stole millions of pounds from hundreds of people over those years. That DOES hurt - it damages people's lives, destroys their futures and their trust. Even if any of his victims 'could afford it, they knew what they were getting into' (his words), he also hurt us.

I remember bailiffs taking furniture and cars he hadn't paid for, with my Mum shouting angrily at them. I remember moving several times, usually from 'posh houses' to council estates where my Mum would cry again and my stoical grandmother would purse her lips and start cleaning. I remember saying goodbye to several schools and groups of friends because we needed to move again. I don't know how many schools I attended or how many places we lived in. I'm pretty sure we lived with both grandmothers at one time or another.

I remember feeling ashamed of myself because I hated writing to him. I hated the prison issue paper that his letters would return on, stamped in red and filled with his lovely fluent handwriting, almost as fluent as his promises of a better life and how he would be home very soon. There were many tears on a Sunday evening as my Mum made me sit and write to him, draw pictures for him, and I would sit in resentment because my sister was deemed too young. I didn't want to think about him reading those letters or putting up my pictures in his tiny 'room'.

Even worse though were the visits. Bedford Remand Centre was the one I hated the most and the one he seemed to spend the most time in (I didn't know what remand meant, but I knew it meant Bedford). Spring Hill in Aylesbury, Highpoint, Sudbury...these names were familiar to me long before I understood what my dad had actually done. We would go on trains and buses, never being able to afford the food in the cafes or on the train, me feeling bored and travel-sick, cramped and wary of my increasingly bitter mother's sharp words as I teased my fractious sister for something to do. We would arrive and usually there was a special 'prison bus' - everyone knew where you were going. The queue on the street outside with cars passing you by as you stood in shame with the other women and children you didn't get to play with. The security officers, the nailed down tins for ashtrays, the gates and keys.

And the visit itself - the hugs of joy and attention craved, then being told to go and play with your sister in the grotty corner full of broken toys and ancient books. There was always a hatch where you could buy tea and sweets. My sister thought that Dad worked in a sweet shop. I prided myself that I was a big girl trusted with the truth: he was in prison.

At 11, I was the target of school bullies whose parents were themselves targeting my mother because no one wanted families like hers round there. I don't remember this. I went to live with my Nan, 30 miles away, because the social worker said that if I didn't she would have to take me instead. I don't remember that. I lived with Nan and my lovely auntie for the next 18mths, and I loved that. When Mum and my sister finally moved to the same town, I didn't want to return to live with them. I remember that. I felt bad about that.

Dad came out and moved in, and we were supposed to be a normal family. I went to school and learned that some teachers were pretty amazing people actually. Mum was resentful and bitter. We were poor, then rich, then poor again. Dad had a breakdown, Mum got a job and worked a lot of hours and said mean things about him. Then he did it again, and back he went, for another five years. The train journeys and writing started again, as did the taunts at school and the well-meaning, kind teachers who knew my situation and would solicitously check up on me. I'm fine, I said, I'm used to this. I'm just going to get on with my work.

My Dad's criminal activities and subsequent incarcerations continued until well beyond his retirement age and well into my career. Thankfully, he and my mother divorced just after I married and two stepmothers followed in succession. From the age of 18, I flatly refused to

visit him in prison, meaning that there has been several long stretches of time with little contact between us. I swore I wouldn't visit a prison again, and neither would my children, and I meant it.

Things I learned from being the child of a prisoner:

- People assume children can't hear or don't understand far too much.
- Your brain can be selective about what you remember and choose to forget or ignore.
- The shame is transmitted to the family who stand by and wait.
- Hurt is not just physical pain.
- Parents are humans first and foremost and sometimes they mess up, and when they do, you need to focus on the children because they didn't ask for that at all but now they have to live with it.
- I am not my parents and I do not have to repeat their mistakes.
- My experience made me particularly empathetic towards children who are the victims of a parent's poor choices.
- My experiences influenced me positively, even the negative ones.

In recent weeks a child has taught me something new: not all children feel how I did about visiting their parent in prison. I have always been adamant that children should not visit incarcerated parents: but now I do understand that not visiting can also be problematic. Like everything else, this is about the individual: what is best for this child?

Children Seen and Heard represent this child for me now. Knowing that there are places that will understand that children suffer trauma too, that their voices must be heard, that they need both protection and clarity: this is encouraging, inspiring and I thank them wholeheartedly.