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LOST CHILDHOOD: A FAMILY NARRATIVE

In both arenas, reproductive rights and drugs, calls for prohibition and punishment are often justified by the claim that such punitive approaches are necessary to save the children.

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Joanetta wanted her grown children to take part in the interview. She wanted to place the story of her journey in the context of her family, even when she knew her children's accounts of a childhood with an addicted mother were painful and terribly sad. The family dialogue became intense, not so much because of Joanetta's downfall but because of the continuing grief about their brother Jackie's death and their anxiety about their troubled brother, Ringer.

The dialogue below shows both the collective struggle of children to remain a family and somehow to be instrumental in their mother's recovery. This is not because of a middle-class version of transformed family behavior, but because they would not give up on each other or their parents. Reciprocally, their mother has returned to them, determined to be there for them in spite of her previous abandonment. It is not prison or the state that has rescued this family—it is Joanetta and her children themselves. But can they rescue themselves from the social inequities that press down upon them?

As we talked, each of Joanetta's children reacted to her descriptions of addiction and imprisonment in different and unpredictable ways. This narrative reveals their thwarted hopes. It also reveals their pluck

and ingenuity. If Joannetta is held responsible for the family's burdens, she should also be held responsible for the family's fortitude. Larger social responsibilities for racism, social exclusion, and lack of opportunity underlie these discourses, but the family takes these social inequities in stride, as if they were dealt a "bad" hand and the only thing they can do is bluff and hope for the best.

While Joannetta unflinchingly described the life journey that led up to her imprisonment, her children sat listening. She wanted them to hear it so that the streets, with their lure of money and the dealer's quick escape from the blues, wouldn't claim them, especially Ringer. When she finished her story she called her grown children to sit around a dinner table. She knew that the conversation would be about her years of addiction and she was ready. Her children, two of them with infants, rarely left the table except to bring their toddler's toys. It was Sunday morning and they talked until the sun cast dark shadows in the room.

Jeff, Joannetta's sometimes partner, took care of the children for much of the day, but he was not part of the conversation. A tall, handsome man, younger than Joannetta, Jeff was very attentive to the children for about three hours, then he began to nod off from drugs. By then Alisha's partner Darren, a bright wiry young construction worker, came in and took over child care.

LOST CHILDHOODS

In the text that follows, Alisha, Alvin, Leona, and Ringer reflect on their early years. Alisha, Joannetta's second-oldest girl, has an infant and a toddler. She is beautiful, expressive, very serious. Her youngest brother Alvin, who is an honor student at a college prep high school in Chicago, was the class valedictorian in eighth grade. He scored the highest in his grade school on both the Iowa and the Stanford tests. He is an athletic star who is being scouted for baseball by the University of Arkansas and Northern Illinois University. He is the most playful of the family.

Leona, the oldest girl, is the one who held things together, probably skipping much of her own childhood. She lost all her hair to the disease alopecia at the time that her older brother Ringer was initiated into a gang at age thirteen. She is a single parent of three and she's in her twenties. Leona, like her mother, is adamantly against drugs or alcohol of any kind. She has a no nonsense approach in confronting her brother Ringer about this. She holds her smiling, fat-cheeked baby on her lap.

Joanetta's oldest son Ringer, who is soft-spoken, hangs back and listens. Ringer is slight but apparently powerful. He has two children, but doesn't live with them. He seems sad and though he has been a gang member, his demeanor is not tough. He is polite, even timid.

Alisha I was 16 when my mama went to prison for over a year. I had a four-day-old daughter. I dropped out of school and started smoking weed. I was glad she went to prison because she was going back and forth to jail—there was no program, nothing to do her justice.

Alvin I didn't want her to go to jail because I didn't believe she'd change. I sent her letters to plead, beg, pray she'd change. I guess some of them worked.

Alisha I always believed she'd change.

Alvin I was nine when she went to prison. I was ready because she sent us to Grandma's when she knew where the path was heading.

Alisha We went to see her at Kankakee for Christmas. We didn't have a Christmas even though we had little kids. We had no tree, no presents. But it was good to see her.

Leona I dropped out of high school. I got a scholarship to Truman College after I finished my GED with very high scores, but I couldn't take it because I got to work. I just missed to be the valedictorian of our class. I work for my daddy at the not-for-profit Lawndale Community newspaper. I do layout, administrative work. My daddy wanted an information source for people coming out of jail. He wrote a grant—he's so smart. He's been clean for 8 years.

When Mama went to prison we was living with our cousin. The cousin put us out. She was addicted, too. I was crying because I didn't want to have to go to the shelter on Belmont and Clark. But I had to go with my sister. We were there four and a half months. I liked it better than Grandma's. Kids there had nowhere to go but the streets. I got kicked out of the shelter for fighting a girl who stole my pants—kids there had no clothes. This girl slept on a bench along Lake Michigan.

Alisha Those days when Mama was doing drugs—I hated. I had no shoes, no bus fare to start high school. She promised me money for school but . . . I didn't start high school for three months. I went and stayed with my aunt.

When we stayed in Waukegan we went days without eating. When we did eat it was peanut butter and sugar bread. Mama got credit from the store until my brother stole. So then I always went to school because we got a good lunch.

Leona I only went to school for first period. I made up a different doctor to get out of school—sometimes an eye doctor, sometimes a foot doctor. One day the teacher said she'd call my Mama, but I didn't care cause we had no phone.

Alvin In summer when we needed bikes we stole them from the rich people. When the bikes caught a flat we had no money to fix the patches.

Alisha We stole a lot . . . every day at the store. Once in Chicago Leona was selling drugs out of the house because my mama was doing drugs bad and we had to stay with my cousin who was awful. Leona had to drop out of school. We had no choice but to sell the drugs because we had nothing.

These children's survival strategies are held to standards they can't possibly uphold. Researcher Peggy McIntosh has shown that white privilege is as invisible to its beneficiaries as the relentless stripping of options is for those without class, race, and gender advantages. Joannetta and her children are neither lamenting the hand they've been dealt, nor blaming a culture that demonizes them. They are doing what they've always done—struggling to survive, alone, knowing there will not be support if they slip. For Joannetta's family, individual and collective survival is a victory when every social indicator would have predicted family and individual disintegration.

CONFRONTING VIOLENCE, DEATH, AND LOSS

The death of their brother Jackie deeply affected this family, none more so than its most vulnerable member, Ringer. He is the child of Joannetta's teenage pregnancy before she met Darnell, the father of the others. Ringer has always felt like an outsider, yet he is deeply connected to his family. Jackie's killing left Ringer bereft and fatalistic. As the oldest, he felt his task was to make sure his younger brother Jackie did not make the mistakes he made. When he couldn't protect the brother he loved, he gave up. He seems more defeated than hardened.

Leona Our brother Jackie was very shy. He was a star on the basketball team at Acorn, then he went to Marshall High School. Everybody at school had nice clothes, so he needed them too. He started

making money selling, so he quit high school. He wasn't using, except weed.

Ringer When we lived in Waukegan I had to turn myself in to the police because I shot a BB gun that hit a fire hydrant, bounced off, and hit a girl in the eye. I went to the juvenile home for eight months, then I went to a foster home.

When I came back from Waukegan and I saw that Jackie had all these good shoes, I told him not to drop out of school or he'd end up like me.

Alvin (The night) Jackie was killed he hung out with guys he didn't know. They were smoking blunts (marijuana) in a stolen car, but he didn't know it. The guy whose car had been stolen had been following the car driven by my brother's new friend. He was killed by mistake . . . but the guy who did it said he was fixin' to kill somebody. He was shot three times. His brains were shot out.

I had just got back from athletic camp that night to learn he was killed. I didn't cry because I thought he was just shot in the arm. When I saw him in the hospital I broke down.

I was doing good, but after [his death] my grades went bad. I had no attention span. I dropped basketball. My brother's friends said "Take his place. You look like him. We've got your back." But I wasn't that messed up to take the offer.

Ringer I'm just getting myself together. My mama don't understand how bad my brother's death has affected me. It should have been me killed. He had a chance to make it out. Maybe it was for a reason or maybe his death was supposed to change everybody's life.

Leona My sister stopped weed after Jackie's death. I stopped after I was pregnant. Maybe you, Ringer, have a weak will. You've been to prison for three years and say you'll change, but you don't.

Ringer I went to prison in November of 1999. I beat up my girlfriend's brother because he called me names. I was addicted. I have a temper . . . I did this at the probation officer's office! I caught eight years but did only two because of boot camp. It was bad, but I had to come home because when my brother was killed I almost went crazy. I beat up people.

It hurt me when my mother went to jail because I was messed up. I had emotional problems. I kept it inside; that's why my temper was so bad. I was alone. I needed her and she wasn't there for me . . . she'd never been there for me anyway.

She sent me letters but it didn't help because she wasn't there. I was still stuck at the point where everything was snatched from me. My mother being with their father . . . I felt left out. Their father paid attention only to them.

Leona and Alisha Wait a minute, we got whupped with extension cords.

Ringer I got beat . . . if you all did something, I got whupped.

Alisha My grandfather whupped us for allowing a teddy bear's stuffing to come out. He hit us with an extension cord. But we fought him back. I wouldn't let him hit my brother with that extension cord.

Ringer He hated me because I almost killed their son [Ringer's stepfather]. He knocked my mother's arm out of place, so I got my friends and we knocked him out.

Joanetta When I took parenting classes I realized I wasn't supposed to whup.

Leona I won't whup my kids—no whupping.

MARKED FOR LIFE: STIGMA AND PLUCK

Whether these young people see themselves as branded like their mother, like Ringer, or whether they become compensatory, determined to avoid the pitfalls of prison and addiction, like Leona, they still bear the stigma of their past. The conditions that led to their mother's addiction continues to surround them. Leona insists that her children will never be "whupped," and she insists that nothing can ever persuade her to do drugs, but she is a single parent with three children who will grow up protecting each other as her brother Ringer protected her from the dangers of a west side abandoned by hope. How will she keep her boys from other "whuppins" or safe from schools where every student knows they will likely never make it out of the west side, where gangs vie for the only capital that flows toward the west side? Will her strength be enough? Will she be tempted to whup the boys into compliance for their safety? If her meager salary cannot feed her small family, if she cannot return to college to better herself, will this young woman, who was almost class valedictorian and who spent her childhood protecting her brothers and sisters, despair and turn to drugs?

Leona met despair as a young child and she chose survival and a steadiness that everyone depended on. She insists she won't veer from that path, yet the context of her refusing "whuppins," of telling the

truth even when it's painful, is a context so stacked against her best efforts that her triumph will be a small miracle.

That one mother, Joanetta, was addicted and that another mother, her daughter Leona, refused addiction, is the “text” that dominant culture reads while averting its gaze from the social inequities that undercut both mothers at every turn. Policy makers have stigmatized mothers like Joanetta as radically different from “normal” women. The abdication of their mothering role is considered all but incomprehensible, but the state’s “protective” response to her children amounts to “neglect and abuse,” which is more damaging. This state failure, however, remains hidden because it is embedded in policy decisions that relegate the children of the poor to life opportunities that guarantee social exclusion. Like their mother, the children are considered expendable.

RINGER'S DESPAIR

Alvin, Alisha, and Leona have fought against their expendability, but Ringer believes the stigmas that have been forced on him. In spite of the fact that he, like his siblings, scored high on school exams, and that before he dropped out of high school he was an excellent athlete who took third in the state in cross country, Ringer has little confidence in himself. Although no one said it, it was clear they were terrified that something tragic could happen to Ringer. Though he denied being a gang member, Joanetta insists that he is still affiliated. He attributes his initial gang involvement with his need to protect his sister.

I was thirteen when I got initiated into a gang. When my sister (Leona) lost her hair I had to leave school early to pick her up so nobody messed with her. I had to fight every day for her . . . kids who'd pull her scarf off. It messed me up that I had to leave school one hour early every day. One time I got into a fight with a gang-banger—a guy who killed people—I had to fight him because of what he did to my sister. After that nobody messed with me.

Ringer was living with Joanetta at the time of the interview. He wasn't working because he could do better selling on the streets. Given the job opportunities for young black males, his assessment, though dangerous and heartbreaking to his family, was not a depraved, thug-gish choice. He kept telling his mother he was not selling, which she didn't believe.

Joanetta, who was calm with everyone, flared at him, confronting his continued use of drugs. Then Alisha defended him, breaking down, almost begging her mother not to hurt him. Joanetta grew tougher, as if any response that gave an inch to Ringer was enablement.

Ringer (responding to Joanetta's confronting him about his habit) You don't even remember me playing sports. You don't know I have my GED. You worship the ground they walk on.

Alisha It hurts me when Mama says bad things to Ringer.

Leona They's always one child who follows they Mama. Maybe he won't do right without being told (the truth).

Alisha is crying now, but Joanetta is dry-eyed and tough.

Joanetta You are used to hustling, Ringer. You learned it from me. You don't show nothin' different. You have an addiction you have no control over. Yeah, maybe God did send you this lady (pointing to herself) for a reason. Ain't nobody got us this far except God. You have to want to live for yourself. What I wrote to you in prison is about what I learned and I got it the hard way. Ain't no one going nowhere with drugs. I know what I did to you. You have to give, Ringer, to get. I chose—chose to be here for you. Do stuff from your heart, not to receive.

Ringer (turns to address me) My stepfather made her choose him over me.

Alisha (crying hard) You have to give him a chance, Mama.

Leona He's had a chance. He doesn't take care of the children he's had with Lola.

Ringer Lola cut me with a knife. Yeah, I pulled a gun on her because I got the kids candy and she was mad. She was mad too because I wouldn't have sex with her. She was little and pregnant and I was afraid for her.

Joanetta I think he was high.

Ringer (addressing me) My daddy was an alcoholic.

Alisha (seems to be pleading) Mama . . .

Ringer pulls his chair back but remains silent. After a few minutes of silence, he puts forward his last plea.

Ringer Maybe it was meant for Mama to get herself together . . . I mean, she is our mama. But she's got to give me a chance. Everybody

has a choice. Look how long it took her to get it together. Look at all I've been through. Jackie . . . you don't know how it affected me. You see me every day, but you don't know what I'm feeling.

GENDER IMPRISONMENT

Joanetta seems to be the one family member who obliquely sees that her role as a wife and mother shaped her addiction. Her children say little about their father's imprisonment, his other family, or the addiction that prevented him from supporting them. Internalizing the culture's gender standards, Joanetta's family holds her responsible for both their survival and their unraveling. Joanetta's children are unsparing in revealing the pain her addiction cost them. Underlying their stories is a degradation they don't identify—poverty that stalked their mother's own childhood and theirs. In spite of her addiction, their mother kept a roof over their heads until she lost custody of her children to her mother-in-law. Only their mother identifies another degradation—her husband's control. "I never asked what I wanted from life . . . Darnell told me how life should be."

Researcher Beth Richie believes that legally incarcerated women are victims of gender incarceration before they ever reach a prison or jail cell. As a result of her work with women at Rikers Island Prison, Richie identified the physical or sexual violence experienced by women, in particular African-American women, as a gender trap that compels them to crime. These women, ignored by mainstream culture and policy analysts, have also too often been invisible to feminist antiviolence workers and researchers. According to Richie, African-American women "exist in a social world that was determined to condemn them, only to be exiled from the broader society that failed to deliver promised opportunity and rewards. To this, add the social context of an unresponsive social service system, a mean spirited and repressive public welfare agenda, increasingly aggressive law enforcement policies, and growing social intolerance for women who cannot fit in to dominant society . . . and their gender entrapment becomes clearer."²

Entrapment is about a lack of choices. White middle-class ideology assumes a variety of choices that permit a self-determining subjectivity. The entrapment net that catches poor mothers also sweeps up their children. Gender is a trap for poor battered women, but the impoverished west side of Chicago, for all of its people's courage, is a trap, too. What choice does Ringer have? What choice does Joanetta have in "saving" him? It is true that Ringer has no chance until he kicks drugs?

But what are his chances even then? He is battered by a system that has written him off; he is an ex-con with little hope of finding decent paying work; his “weakness” is that he believes the stereotypes that have been forced on him.

Social policy makers invariably “read” Ringer’s text, as well as Joannetta’s, from a “deficit assessment” model of interpretation. Historically, America’s policy makers stigmatize the poor, but if the texts are read from sociologist John McKnight’s asset model, another story emerges. It is the story of a family’s courage and resourcefulness when confronted with all but impossible odds. An asset model simply shifts interpretation and policy from investigation of a family’s deficits to identifying the family’s assets. Current policy sees the stigmatized as families who need “services” in order to conform to middle-class, white standards of family life. McKnight’s asset model begins with the family’s strengths, in spite of evident problems. Because the focus is not on family pathology, structural failure can be addressed. Moreover, for families overwhelmed by social exclusion, asset-based policies would offer support identified as necessary by those families who need support, not by bureaucracies created to spot failure, such as the child welfare system. Asset-based policies not only disrupt the current dependency model by creating partnerships focused on strengths instead of weaknesses, they also foster social sufficiency and hope.

Except for Ringer, Joannetta’s children have hopes. They have managed to stay together and to place enormous faith in their youngest sibling, Alvin, to “make it” to college. Realists, they have redirected childhood dreams within the limited options they have. It is poignant to hear Alisha reflect on the dreams they had as children: “When she was on drugs, Mama would put us in a room and we’d talk about things. My brothers and Leona used to talk after we got whapped and we said we’ll never grow up and do drugs. The boys would say they wanted to be doctors. I wanted to be a lawyer. Alvin wanted to be a football player.”

Listening to them, Joannetta said with sorrow and honesty: “They all had to figure out how to survive. When they saw my addiction was not going to change, they would talk and figure out how to support and to feed each other.”

The dilemma for Joannetta and her children is clear: How do we survive in a world where the choices offered are not transformative? Confronted by poverty, addiction, and inadequate education, their victory is the fact that they survived as a family and continue to cling to each other in spite of the wounds they carry.