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## Sentencing Day

by Tracy Altvater

No one knows how much I cried that day. It was the 13<sup>th</sup> day of March and my son's hearing was set to start at 3 P.M. Life forever changed the moment I stepped through the wooden doors of our beautiful, historic courthouse. The stone building lined with glorious windows held so many life altering events from years past and people that I probably had never met. It was the center of our city. It was the place I obtained my marriage license. The place where I took my fourth son to have his homecoming pictures taken. The courthouse adorned strings of Christmas lights in the winter, held Easter egg hunts in the spring and flew American flags in the yard to represent the fallen in the summer. I tried to smile thinking of all the beauty this place held for myself and others as well, but I couldn't.

So many people showed up for him. His friends Kody, Ian and Jeremy stood out amongst several others. They were his closest friends growing up. So many of his first experiences in his life included them and now they were here with tear stained faces and heavy hearts holding out for the impossible to happen. In groups they flocked to the third floor and stood near the balcony overlooking the entrance to the foyer. Blank stares filled their faces. I searched their eyes for hope, but it seemed they were all as hopeless as I was. The bailiff came out into the hallway.

"You are not permitted to be out in the hallway. I need you to make your way into the waiting room, thank you," he said. Disgruntled sighs escaped several of my son's supporters, but no one protested. In silence everyone walked into this tiny room that didn't have enough seats for us all, so most of us stood. Sweat formed on my forehead and it seemed like there was no air

to breathe. My mother in law opened a window to let some cool March air in. There was worn, red wall to wall carpet on the floor and black metal seats lining the dingy beige walls. It felt like hours passed before we heard from anyone outside of that room.

The door opened. “You may go into the courtroom now,” said the bailiff. We all made our way to the hallway. We stood in a line and waiting our turn to be patted down and waved over by the metal detecting wand. My heart was pounding so hard I was sure everyone in the hallway could hear it. As his mother, they let me go in first, followed by my husband and children. I couldn’t stand to see the sadness in their eyes.

The sun cascaded through the windows falling upon the hardwood benches and illuminating the jury section of the courtroom. The ceiling was decorated with paintings of corn fields, the state logo, and portraits of Ohio’s history that stood out against the creamy, beige background. The air seemed thick and I breathed in heavily. I looked at my sons.

“It’s going to be okay,” I lied. I knew it wasn’t. But I couldn’t melt yet. Not yet.

“I know,” said my oldest Nick, who was almost 22, as he squeezed my hand and smiled like today was any other day than this. I knew it was fake, but I smiled back. The court room filled. His friends took up the first three rows. They whispered and chuckled as if they were recalling perfectly happy memories. I hoped they were.

I heard him before I could see him. Chains dragged the floors as the bailiff guided him into the courtroom. I cringed as the chains scraped the table as he sat down. The image of his frail, thin body covered in bright orange stole the breath right out of my chest. I stared at the metal that surrounded his ankles, waist and wrists. It seemed like they would hold him forever.

“All rise,” said the bailiff. Judge Barrett entered the courtroom, draped in black, and took his place in the center of the room.

“You may be seated,” the judge said. Everyone took their seats once again on the hard benches.

There was no jury. There were no witnesses. Just my son, Peyton. He was all of eighteen years old. Just a baby. He made a mistake. They swore him in.

“Do you swear that the testimony you are about to give is the truth, the whole truth, so help you God?” asked the bailiff.

Peyton swore it was.

Peyton had already signed a plea bargain prior to this hearing. His defense lawyer, Mr. Elliot, was a joke. He stood up in front of the court with his too tight suit and double chin. “Your honor, I want it to be known to the court that Mr. Peyton George has had no priors, is a high school graduate, and has held employment prior to his arrest. I would like this information to be taken into consideration when sentencing him. Thank you,” he said. That was it. He had nothing better to say.

“Thank you, Mr. Elliot,” said Judge Barrett.

My mind filled with “what ifs” just then. What if they set him free? What if the judge thought the plea bargain was too harsh? What if the judge decided the time agreed upon wasn’t long enough? As if they were side by side on a racetrack, my thoughts sped right past the beating of my heart.

Then it was time. The moment that changed my forever. Judge Barrett was about to hand over his sentence. He once again read my son’s charges and included “punishable by” whatever amount of prison time each charge held. I went foggy. Time stopped and I held my breath longer than I should. After he was done, he sentenced my eighteen-year-old boy to eight years and nine months of prison time. It was then I melted into the floor. It was then his baby blue eyes met

mine and my soul was bare and bleeding for everyone to see. I could no longer physically stop what my heart felt from showing on the outside. I couldn't breathe anymore.

"It's okay baby," my husband said, pulling me close to him by my waist as he held me up from falling. But it wasn't okay. It would never be okay again. My son sat there, expressionless. I knew he didn't want me to see how much he was hurting.

"All rise," the bailiff said as the judge exited to his chambers. The bailiff grabbed my son's arms and the chains once again filled my ears, clinking against the table, sliding around his bony wrists as he stood. The courtroom emptied and I walked down the two flights of stairs to the outside. I looked back up to the building that had now become cold to me and its beauty began to fade. Any good memories it ever held were now replaced with the fact that it homed the worst day of my life.

I don't remember the drive home, but I remember crashing into my bedroom floor where I cried for hours. I decided that wasn't where my story would end. I decided to rise, like a phoenix from the ashes left behind from the day. I reached out to other mothers. I became everything I would need for support to give another person and I became the mother my son needed while he dealt with his incarceration and would continue to need upon his release. I started preparation for his homecoming. I educated family and friends on how to communicate with Peyton and how outside support was key to his success once he was home with us. I still fall sometimes, but with falling comes rising and I will do it as many times as I have to until one day the only falling I would do will be into my son's arms when he walks out of those cold, steel gates.