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WordsUncaged Submission
(Non-Fiction Auto-Bio Story)

This is a true story about how I came to be in prison, how I had everything good going for me and yet found myself associated with murder and attempted murder. I went from being a rising star among the Non-Commissioned Officer ranks of the United States Army to suddenly finding myself sentenced to life without the possibility of parole for something that, on the surface, is not even a crime. It is a story of how my faith was shaken to its core and required divine intervention to prove to me that God is listening.

I was raised Catholic in a small town outside of New Orleans, and served as an altar boy in my local church. Then, when I was thirteen, after being introduced to God in a more real and personal way, I started to attend an Assembly of God church. My experiences with Christianity at that young age, in my mind, were very profound, and I believed everything that was preached to me without question. That is not to say that I don't believe those teachings now. Over the years, though, I have practiced them less and less. One thing I do know is, no matter what your circumstances, there is a God and he does listen. Sometimes we need to be reminded of that. Mine took place in a jail cell in 1991.

I joined the U.S. Army in 1982, right out of high school. My sole purpose for joining was to make that my career. I chose tanks as my job field. A year into my service, I married my high school sweetheart and we had two children, both girls. My service allowed me to travel all over the world. I served three years in Germany and toured most of Europe during that time. In 1987, I was selected by the Department of the Army to serve as an Army Recruiter. The Army selects only the top ten percent of Sergeants to perform this duty. I accepted this as an honor bestowed upon me by my superiors as a direct result of my achievements during my service. By the time I settled into this new job, I felt like I had just about everything a man could ever want; a good job, a wife and kids, a new home, two new cars and a motorcycle, a nice church to attend, and a healthy bank account. Life was pretty good! I achieved the rank of Sergeant, and was on the promotion list for Staff Sergeant. Yet, as with most people, I felt something was still missing. That is when life, as I knew it, changed forever.

I started making stupid choices. First, I chose career over family. Recruiting duty is not what everyone sees. There are extremely long hours; a lot of driving if you serve a rural area like I did; a lot of scolding from my superiors when I did not meet the quota that I was assigned. That usually resulted in even longer hours, and most weekends. Even though I lived in the same house with my family, there were times where I did not see my kids for weeks. As weeks progressed to months, I was seeing less and less of them. I would leave for work before anyone got up and I did not return until well after everyone went to bed for the night.

Every military family will tell you that the wife inherits a multitude of responsibilities for the sake of the service. The wife of a military family has to not only take care of the home, but also most of the responsibilities that the father usually takes care of. Many military wives have the added responsibility of taking care of the children without the help of the father, and many more have an outside job in addition to their home responsibilities. All of this equates to enormous pressures placed on the family as a whole and that is why military families have some of the highest divorce rates in America. My family was no different. When I had the opportunity to finish out my term of service and get out of the Army, a former superior offered me the job of a lifetime in the civilian sector. I declined it stating that the Army is my career and I wanted to see it through to retirement. He understood, as he too was a retired serviceman. That is where things went from bad to worse.

Throughout our marriage, Gail was a terrific mom and wife. She maintained the house and children with excellent care and even managed to work a full-time job. At only twenty-four, she was very understanding of my work and was willing to endure it all. I, on the other hand, allowed the pressures of my job, along with the selfish ambitions of meeting new friends, to cloud my judgment. A chance meeting turned into a flirtation, which turned into an affair. Of course, very few affairs go unnoticed and Gail confronted me with the fact that I had violated her trust. Soon after, I chose to reenlist, and we decided that the best course of action was to separate, and she would return to New Orleans with the kids. The separation turned into a divorce and in the back of my mind, I knew walking away from Gail, and my kids, was the biggest mistake I would make in my life.

Despite that knowledge, I adjusted to a single's lifestyle. With each passing month, I stayed out later, partying with my new friends. I started spending more money than what I was making and sending to my now ex-wife and kids. I knew that financially I was on dangerous ground, yet it did not matter because I was enjoying myself. Little did I know that there was a battle being waged inside of me; part of me was having fun, but a bigger part of me was telling me that I missed my kids and wife and was heading down a dangerous road. Of course, I

did not listen to that voice inside my head giving me good advice to try and fix everything. For another year and a half, my ex-wife tried to restart our relationship every chance she got. I remember her telling my grandmother, "Don't worry, I'll get him back." Even though I was having a good time, my financial situation was getting progressively worse.

In June of 1990, I finished my term as a Recruiter and was transferred to Fort Irwin, California. I remember driving across this great country on Interstate 40, thinking that a new place would mean a fresh start and change my perspective on everything that was going on in my life. The problem is, I was bringing the same baggage with me, and all of my financial troubles were following me. A little advice to everyone reading this: moving to a new state does not prevent the banks from finding you; they do have telephones, you know!

After less than a year in California, I found myself in a jail cell, arrested for the death of a man who was the husband of the woman I was dating. To say it was a complicated situation would be an understatement; I could not believe that I was actually arrested. When this man died, I was participating in a military school three states away! How could anyone accuse me of this man's murder? While I was attending this resident school in Colorado, the husband was stabbed to death in a fit of rage. Phone calls I had placed just prior to the murder, to the woman and one of my subordinates, was all the evidence needed to implicate me in this crime as a co-conspirator. Nine months later, I received two additional charges alleging that I conspired with this same subordinate in the attempted murder of my former wife.

While this was taking place in county jail, my aunt and uncle were traveling to New Orleans to visit the family. They were on their way to South America with their church to conduct missions, and would be gone for three or four months. When they arrived to visit with my grandmother, she informed them as to what had taken place with me. As I found out much later, it was at that point that my Uncle Jerry called his church and told them he would not be going with them to South America; he had another mission that was laid on his heart.

My Aunt Celeste and Uncle Jerry have long been two of the strongest Christians I know. This was her second marriage. Her first marriage abruptly ended with the death of my Uncle Louie. He had battled with a drug addiction for several years, and it took his life. I remember the first time I met my Uncle Jerry. They live near Columbia, South Carolina. I was just old enough to drive and I helped my older sister move to Columbia to go to Bible college and live with them. He was no-nonsense when it came to the teachings of the Bible. I always remember the sparkle in his eyes when he talked about the love of God. Like me, Aunt Celeste was raised Catholic and becoming a born-again Christian was a new experience for her. The change in her was quite remarkable. To this day, they have remained faithful and I admire them so much for that.

Humans are creatures of habit. For instance, in the military, when the enemy approaches, all sense of right or wrong leaves the mind and your training goes into automatic mode. Without hesitation, your main goal is to eliminate the threat before the enemy has time to kill you. It's the same when you are faced with a difficult situation as a person who believes in God. The first thing you do is pray. And, that is exactly what I did at this point. Boy, did I pray! My prayers ran the gamut from, "God, what am I going to do? Please send me some help;" to, "Why did you let this happen to me?" For the first several weeks of my incarceration, I felt that my prayers were going only as far as the ceiling of the jail cell. All my family was back in Louisiana; my fellow soldiers in my unit (for whatever reason) elected not to come see me or help me, and I was not from this area, so I knew no one in there at all. I was a complete outsider, and I felt extremely alone. I could not understand why this was happening to me, and why was everything being taken away from me—including my freedom. The worse was the thought that I may never see my kids again.

A week later, I was just about at my lowest in jail. I had been moved to a long-term housing unit, which consisted of a ten-man cell that housed twelve of us. So, for the first few days, I had to bunk on the floor since I was the "fish." The new detention center had not been finished yet and the old county jail was horrendous! The unit consisted of six ten-man cells with bars across the entire front. There was not enough room in the sleeping area so they had two bunks in the dayroom area right next to the restrooms, and the noise was constant. You slept very little and there was little to do other than read, or play cards while you wait for your day in court. Tensions were always high and everyday someone was getting beat down or stabbed somewhere throughout the jail. Usually, someone would get called out a visit and they would "get it" while walking down the main hallway. So, getting a page to visit or medical was never a good sign.

My page happened the week I was close to my preliminary hearing date. For a man that was used to the stress of being a soldier, and leader of soldiers, I can tell you that this was a new kind of stress for me, and it was incredibly difficult to maintain my sanity. I could not accept the fact that I was in jail facing several charges, and I could not understand why God was not hearing my prayers and sending someone to come get me out of this

situation. I heard the page telling me I had a visitor. At first, I thought about asking the officer to verify that it was my visitor and not someone else's. But then I said a silent prayer and resolved myself to the fact that if someone were plotting against me, for whatever reason, then I would defend myself the best way that I could. I only hoped at that point that I would see my potential enemy before he sees me.

I walked down the corridor towards the visiting area. Amazingly, the path was completely empty. I walked in and the officer directed me down a certain row to a numbered window. As I stepped up to the window, Uncle Jerry was standing there with a broad smile and a look of "Surprise!" on his face. When we picked up the phone to speak, this is the first thing he told me that day:

"Jeff, I went home to see the family because I was leaving for South America with our church. When I got to Grammie's house, she told me what had happened to you and where you were. I knew right then and there that I wasn't going to South America after all. I was coming out to California to see you. I don't know all the details of the trouble that you are in. But, God laid upon my heart to tell you that He listens to you."

I do not remember most of the conversation after that. But I do know that God knew that the one person that I would trust with a message from Him would be my strongest Christian. I honestly feel that anyone else would have said that to me, I would have thanked them in the spirit that it was meant, but I would feel that they were just being concerned for my wellbeing. This however, came from someone that I had not spoken to in a year or two and his words were simple yet so profound. I know it could have come only from God himself. He went on to share with me that I may have a long journey ahead of me, but God is faithful and will see me through it.

It has been twenty-seven years since that visit. His words have remained true: it has been a long journey, yet God has remained faithful in keeping me safe throughout it all. Some of my fears of 1991 have proven true: I did lose everything that I thought was important only because of my selfish ambitions. More importantly, it cost me any kind of relationship I will ever get to have with my two daughters. They are grown now, married, with their own children, and I am ashamed to say that because of what has happened, I could not even tell you the names of my grandchildren. But all is not lost. God has blessed me with a wonderful wife of now twenty-one years, and despite so many court setbacks, I remain patiently hopeful that God will allow just one of several remaining options that are actively seeking my exoneration and release. While I may not practice my faith as well as I should, I do know that God does listen to prayer even from someone that may not deserve to be heard or someone who fails miserably in his walk. Even at your lowest, when you think no one is hearing you, or cares, God is listening.