

Stuck

By Padmavathi Karri

It's cold outside. Yet I feel warm. The prison was warm and damp, yet I was always chilled to the bone. Adjusting to the world outside of the four grey walls I was stuck in for five years hasn't been easy. My wife Stacy's support and my daughter's unconditional forgiveness have made it so I'd at least want to try. I fiddle with the yellow braided friendship bracelet my daughter took hours to make as I leisurely walk to the health clinic close to our neighborhood. It's my first check-up after prison. I know I'll make it on time—Stacy made sure of it. She said “Don't give them another reason to think you don't deserve their time. Not long ago, you were behind bars, and you're a big black man. Don't wear anything with holes, and don't have your hands in your pockets alright? Don't talk loud. Say yes ma'am. Smile like a fool. Don't tell them you were in prison. They won't understand. They don't know us.”

Freedom to walk outside whenever I want is sweet. It hasn't gotten old. I doubt it will. I can walk for as far as I'd like. I can run. I can even skip if I please. I start humming a tune to rejoice, and suddenly, someone is humming back at me. My feet are stuck to the ground, immobilized. Even though I am here, in my mind, I'm taken back to my prison cell. There's scattered light in our cell, and my cell mate Louis is humming a familiar tune. We're both in here for the same reason. We needed money and people wanted crack. It's still early in the morning before the fights break out and the clamor is constant. The two guys in the next cell are often the source of the noise in this hallway. They'd pick a fight about anything. They tried it with me too. They'd push me around, taunt me, talk about how Stacy wouldn't want me after I got out. And my daughter would hate me. One day, I struck back. I pushed back so hard they'd never dare to try it again. I was terrified they were right.

My feet are unstuck, and I'm brought back to the present. I feel the chilled air slap against my face, and the lush trees outside ground me. I'm not in my cell. I'm outside. I'm home. I keep walking.

I'm seated on the clinic room table and am staring at the tattoos snaking around my arms. Maybe I should have worn something with longer sleeves. What's the doc going to think of my tattoos? “Tattoos? Honey, she won't be thinking much of the tattoos when she sees the size of you,” I could hear Stacy sass at me. I smile at that. She has a point. I'm all of 350 pounds. I haven't been able to get a job since I got out. Who's going to want to hire an ex-felon? Stacy understands, but I can see her frustration growing. I think she thought it would get easier when I got out, not be feeding another mouth. I know she loves me, but I'm scared she'll leave. I don't even remember how I became this big. We went from not having any food on the table to being able to afford whatever we'd like. Things changed for us when I started dealing—I just didn't know prison was part of the change. What else was I supposed to do? Let my family starve? They say I made a choice, but I never had a choice. I was stuck.

Before I could let out a long sigh, I hear hurried knocks on the clinic room door. I expect to see someone distinguished looking, like a doctor, but instead I see someone much

younger and tiny. I make myself smaller than I already feel and ‘smile like a fool’. She asks me a slew of questions, and before I know it, we are talking about my weight and exercising. I reflexively touch the bracelet. She sees. “What’s that?” “My daughter made it for me.” “It’s such a pretty golden color, you must be very proud of your daughter.” “Yes ma’am. I am. Straight A’s.” She smiles, and we continue talking about exercising and making diet changes. I smile and nod, and she’s doing the same. I want it to be easy as she’s making it sound. I want to be better for myself, but more importantly, for my family. I want to not be stuck.

“I know this is easier said than done,” she says. Does she know? She looks maybe five foot and a hundred pounds. How can she possibly know? I ‘smile like a fool’ and “yes ma’am” her.

She thinks I’m a nice friendly man—I can tell. Am I deceiving her? I don’t know. She asks me about my occupation, and I tell her I have a job interview tomorrow. “Congratulations, I hope it works out for the best,” she says. She doesn’t ask for what kind of job. Was that on purpose? She’s being incredibly nice. Why? I quickly feel claustrophobic, caged in not by 4 walls, but by fear. Fear of everything. Fear of never being enough. Fear of being seen but not heard. I’m numb. She listens to my heart. Does she hear how fast it’s beating? I decide to tell her. The second she sits down on her doctor stool, I tell her I was imprisoned for five years and got released seven months ago. She looks up from the notepad she’s scribbling on and looks straight at me with neither a smile nor a frown. “Ok, I hear you.”

I let out a breath.

I forgot I was holding.

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