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Two roaches trailed each other along the far wall before disappearing behind unsightly ripped wallpaper. The stench of marinating mop water and mold seeped up from the dank floor and hung like a rotten fog within the tiny motel room. There was barely walking room between the bed and a dingy lounge chair that looked like it'd been salvaged from a dumpster. Curtains that were formerly ivory colored were now stained yellow and drawn tight, blocking out the daylight. Even so, I knew dusk was approaching and I needed to make at least \$500 to sleep. It had already been a long day. I was tired. I was hungry. I wasn't in a position to be picky. I stood before his reeking, morbidly obese body at 16 years old, 92 pounds, every sense overwhelmed and barely able to discuss a fair price—let alone the cost of my young life. We commenced a stock exchange negotiation, finally agreeing upon \$250; one hour in heaven for him; an eternity of hell for me. I always made it a priority to mentally drift somewhere else. This time was no different. As he climbed on top of me, my mind wandered to moments of my life that didn't define me as a teenage prostitute. Moments that didn't remind me that at 16 years of age, I'd already been sold for sex hundreds of times. I drifted until the full weight of him shifted atop me weighting me with dirt and regret...And with that, the images of myself twirling around as a young ballerina on a grand stage in my pointe shoes were broken and my drifting ended.

It's hard to understand how this could happen to someone like me. I grew up in a sheltered home on the West Side of Chicago. My family was Jehovah's Witnesses, so we had a community that we were a part of. But the reality was that my mother was as unprotected as I was. A child bride; she had four children before turning 21. She truly had no choice when it came to marrying my father. She was 16 and pregnant. Forced to wed a man that didn't love her. A man faced with an ultimatum of marriage or statutory rape charges. A union cursed from the start.

I was the youngest of the four children of my mother and father, barely walking before they separated. Eventually my mother remarried. From the beginning my stepfather was a violent and abusive man. Still, you would assume I had the perfect two parent household, outside looking in. Not long after her union with my stepfather, my mother ended up being "disfellowshipped" – a kind of disowning and shunning if you do something wrong in the congregation's eyes. It was harder without this community. The abuse increased without the eyes of the community on us. Although I can remember Child Protective Services being out a number of times, no one rescued us.

For years my mother tried to make it work. But the price was far too high. And we all had to pay it. We were beaten for the most trivial of things—walking past a piece of paper on the floor, or not being able to find his cigarettes that he hid in some mediocre attempt to quit. Finally, she was brave enough to decide she had enough, and he was gone, this time for good. We were free. Free from him, free from the religion. We were finally free. And we all went wild. Especially my oldest brother and mom. They got involved with some people on the wrong side of the law and began robbing strangers. They were caught, and because my brother was facing the very real possibility of being charged as an adult, my mother stepped up and claimed responsibility. This allowed my brother to take a lesser sentence, but my Mom went to prison.

Just like that, my life had changed so drastically. When I think back now on everything that happened to my mother, I try to extend her grace and understanding, because her life was never her own. We always talk about the systems, like education, foster care, health systems, but there is still so little understanding of what incarceration does to a family – of the collateral damage when a family member – especially a parent – goes to prison. It is devastating. It broke me. I was forever changed in ways many couldn't even begin to fathom.

So that CPS wouldn't take us away, a couple of family members stepped up but that meant we were split up. My brother and I went to live with my biological father. For me that move was catastrophic. I was in 8th grade, had friends, was doing well in school, and suddenly forced into a transition that left me feeling displaced. I didn't want to do it. But no one cared. In the place we were living, it was such a norm to have a parent in prison, no one ever bothered asking, "Are you okay?"

I was at a very tender age – I needed my mother. I wanted my mother. And as hard as I tried to normalize and neutralize my pain, the relentless turmoil left me spiraling. Suddenly school, which had previously been an escape, was a struggle. I went from having friends to having no friends. All my goals and dreams for my future and my life faded. I can't even recall when I gave them up. There was no more room left to dream. How could I? How could a girl whose mother was torn from her when I needed her the most believe in things they tell us to dream of as children? "*What do you want to be when you grow up?*" they ask. If I could answer this now, I would simply respond "whole." I want to be *WHOLE* when I grow up.

It may come as no surprise that I attempted suicide. I reached a point where living was too much of a burden. No one in my life at that point had previously been in my life. So, they didn't notice. And they did not know how to love and support me through my demise.

I was so withdrawn from everything and everyone. I began cutting classes in the middle of school – would go out and then come back at the end of the day and go home as if I had attended school. It wasn't long before the school notified my father of my repeated absences. Although, I did a good job at convincing him it must be some mistake. He took my word but decided he would verify by going to school with me the next day. He told me if he learned I was being untruthful, he would punish me physically. While he never laid a hand on me, I remembered all the violence and abuse from my stepfather and something inside me snapped. I was not going to be abused by another man I was forced to call dad. So, I ran.

I did not put much thought into it. It was a cold winter night. I left in the middle of the night with only my clothes on my back. I remember that first night – out in the cold, freezing, not knowing where to go, not having a place to stay. I jumped in the car with two strange men. And before I knew it, I spent my first night huddled up on a ran down couch that sat in the middle of the basement of a crack house. After a dispute between one of the strange men and the homeowner over drugs, the cops were called. I woke up to their lights flashing in my face. They saw I was a minor; they saw I clearly shouldn't have been there, but instead of rescuing me, they just flushed us all out of the house and back onto the streets. It was bitter cold. But my father

said I couldn't go back home. So at 16, I began house-hopping – going from one place to another – just staying wherever I could, hanging out in places that were warm.

I developed a routine – house hopping and then when I didn't have a place to stay, I would take the bus with the longest ride – all the way out to Fort City Mall – and hang out in the Mall. And that's how I met the guy who trafficked me. He showed up in my life as everything I was missing. My basic human needs had been so severely neglected that it did not take much for him to program me. I invited it. He gave me his phone number and told me to call him, and I did. Some days he picked me up and I would just ride around with him. I felt on top of the world. He never tried to have sex with me or anything like that. He treated me well.

One day, he took me to his house, and it was there that I saw how he lived and that he had other girls living there. I had nowhere to go and nowhere to stay – I was 16 years old -- so I moved in. He never told me the business side of things. One of the other women did that. She took me aside, told me The Rules, set me up. There were three of us at first, then another two later, and then only two of us. They had a "John" who was a photographer who took all our pictures and then he would advertise us online. We would go out – we had to make a certain amount of money each day or he would get really angry and violent.

As I think back on it, I might even have brought some of the violence on myself through my interactions with him. I didn't know what love was, so any attention from him, even negative attention, was better than nothing. I even told myself that he must really care about me if he's getting so mad about the way I'm acting. And every time he struck me, I told myself it is because he loves me. But then there was also violence from the customers. I had guns pulled on me. I was robbed. I was stalked. One man forced me to have sex at knife point. I barely escaped from the van, running to the nearest door of some factory, and pounding on it. Luckily there were people inside. I was naked. Someone pulled me in, covered me and called the police. I remember it being a woman. And she wrapped her arms tightly around me while I sobbed. Between my sobs I could hear her chanting, "Father God..." as though she was praying over me. I was taken by ambulance to the hospital. I should have been safe. At the very least from judgment. But I was treated like nothing more than a prostitute. Like I chose this life, so I brought this on myself. I never wanted to go back for help from health providers again.

This was my life now. Evading the danger and threat of strange men day after day. No breaks. No days off. The police began to recognize me as a regular. They even called me by my street name. And as long as none of the businesses were calling the police on us, they were friendly. Kept an eye on us. Although there was really no need given I was under constant watch. They didn't know I was being trafficked. Not that it would have mattered. I would have protected him with my life.

It all came to a head when my trafficker beat one of the other girls so badly she could barely move. She and I were plotting to escape. But the entire time I was being set up. A test of loyalty, perhaps. He kicked me out. The real tragedy is I begged to stay. I believed him when he said I would have nothing without him. That I would never amount to anything in life. I

believed it all, for a very long time. And just like that I was out on the streets again, cold, hungry, homeless, with no purpose in the world.

Believe me when I say it is not an exaggeration when I say the military saved my life! Just before dropping out of high school, before I had ever run away from home, before anyone ever viewed me as a prostitute, I had signed up for the ROTC. Miraculously, a few years later, a local recruiter found me. He tracked me down from an old address I provided when I completed an interest card. I don't know how after all that time he was able to find me given I no longer had any ties to that address, but he did.

I didn't have anything to my name at that point – no address, no ID, no social security number, no driver's license, nothing. I was on probation from juvenile charges from arrests during the time I was trafficked. But somehow, he found me. I could tell from his expression that he had very little hope I would actually qualify, let alone do what I needed to do on my end to enter service. Still, he saw something in me that I didn't even see in myself. He saw my resilience. He saw my ability to survive. He knew I would be an asset to the Army. And he made it his mission to get me there.

I was starving at that point, down to 92 pounds when I entered service. I had to get a weight waiver upon entering service. But I did it. I did everything I needed to do to board that bus that took a group of us to the airport the next morning to head to basic training. And I never looked back.

I know my story is not unique. There are so many who join the military to escape violence or abuse in their home or community. We need to be on the lookout for these people, to know the signs and indicators of human trafficking and know how to respond appropriately. The military has so many resources, but first you have to know what happened and what the young recruit needs.

I am honored to have served in the military. I've served my country honorably, including one tour to Iraq. But most importantly, I am thankful I had the opportunity and resources to straighten my life out. The military helped me realize what happened to me. And it helped me come to terms with what happened to me was not my fault.

Since leaving the military, I found my voice. I speak about what happened to me and do anti-trafficking work, including education and awareness campaigns to help people understand what trafficking looks like in their own communities. I earned a master's in criminal justice, attended law school, and I am now a practicing criminal defense attorney in the Public Defenders Office. I use my platform now to combat the collateral consequences of incarcerating parents. It was so easy for me to fall through the cracks over and over again. I was abused and trafficked in plain sight. I had contact with law enforcement, educators, health care professionals, even the justice system, and no one noticed. I won't make that same mistake.