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Heather C. Jarvis

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Clawing Toward You

HEATHER C. JARVIS

A slightly different version of this contribution was published in *Prism*.

My mom plopped Annalaya, my younger daughter, on the counter opposite me on the other side of the plexiglass barrier. We were separated by a cycle of generational crime, addiction, mistakes, and my recent indictment. I was facing major time for a drug deal gone wrong. It was enough time that a weight had landed on my chest, making it impossible to breathe without intention. It was likely that I would remain separated from

See original version of this piece at *Prism*: <https://prismreports.org/2023/08/03/incarceration-cyclical-violence-harms-families>.

them for the rest of their lives.

The time was enough to wake me up to the decisions I had made, my poor choices, my undoing. The weight of time also kept me up at night, dreaming of redemption and a second chance. I wanted to fix this, be a good mom and a good daughter. I wanted to prove to God, the world, and myself that I was more than my worst decision. I had no idea if or when I would ever get the chance.

Annalaya had gotten so chubby she made a thump on the ceramic counter. I noticed her knees and lil' rolls. Her growth was evident. The few months I had been gone so far—evident. She had on a jean skirt that I easily recognized. It was a hand-me-down from my older daughter, Adessa, eight at the time. Adessa had been dragged through my addiction. Annalaya was too young—she didn't know me as an addict. It hurt to admit it, but at eight months old, she didn't know me at all. Maybe that was better.

The little skirt was flared at the bottom, with peace signs stitched on the pockets. Her skirt had the reminders of peace, even if her life did not. Peace was not something passed down in my family.

Adessa jumped up to the glass, frantically clawing, wanting to touch me. Her looks were changing too, as she grew up without me. Adessa scanned the closet-like room, trying to find a crack or a hole she could crawl through to get to me.

There are a lot of cracks in the system, none of which get you to your family.

She continued to dig at the glass fervently,

like a puppy trying to dig her way to me, as if I were her hidden bone.

I could see her longing.

I could see her weeping.

I could feel her helplessness.

There was no way she could get to me, nor I to her. I refused to let her see my pain. Even though my heart was shattered and I had no one to help me pick up the pieces. Annalaya was mean-mugging me; she clearly had no idea who I was.

It hurt deeply. It cracked my spirit.

I placed my hand on the glass with a hint of a smile. Adessa's hand mirrored mine. Then Annalaya curiously placed hers on the glass too, thinking it was a game. I couldn't keep one rogue tear from trickling down my cheek. Just as I couldn't keep my children's hearts from breaking. I peeked at my mom and dad, both hands still pressed to the glass, trying to will it to disappear. My parents looked helpless. My mom let her shoulders fall, defeated. I nodded knowingly.

I could not think of one word to comfort them.

"I love you," I said, thinking to myself, *Why was that not enough to stop me from destroying my life and theirs? Why did I do this to them? Why did I do this to myself?*

Over the next ten years, the justice system would not lead me back to my family, help me heal, restore me, or even help me fight my addiction. I had to figure that out on my own, in spite of the barriers before me. It was up to me to claw my own way out of hell and back to them.