

OLIVIA HAMILTON, ROBIN LEVI, AYELET WALDMAN



An Oral History of Olivia Hamilton

FROM *Inside This Place, Not of It: Narratives from Women's Prisons*

AGE 25, FORMERLY IMPRISONED

Olivia lives with her husband and three sons in an apartment that FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) provided for her family because they evacuated New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. We sit at a table in her breakfast nook as she shares her story: abandonment by her mother, teenage pregnancy, forced evacuation from her city, and imprisonment. Olivia gave birth to her youngest son while she was in prison serving a six-month sentence for embezzling money to pay her bills. During the birth, she was chained to an operating table and given a forced and medically unnecessary cesarean section. Olivia gave birth to another child in July 2011, but because of Olivia's c-section in prison, her local hospital was unwilling to allow her to try for a vaginal birth and she was forced to have another c-section. The son she birthed while imprisoned, now three years old, bounds around the apartment wearing only a diaper, occasionally interrupting our interview to squeeze his mother's leg. During the interview, Olivia describes her distrust of both the prison and the healthcare system, and describes her precarious journey toward reestablishing her life post-incarceration.

And Then the Hurricane Hit

My grandma tells a story about when I was a little girl, that one day I got a broom and started beating my doll with it, saying, "That's what my mom does." After that, my mom sent me to live with my

grandma in Louisiana, St. Charles Parish. My relationship with my grandma was really good, but she was strict with me.

My brother and sisters stayed in Georgia with my mom. I talked with my mom some, not a lot. I had a lot of resentment, I guess, for her sending me to live with my grandma when I was so young. I think the problems began when I was around twelve. It was never my grades, it was just that I was in trouble with the juvenile detention people all the time for fighting and running away; I was trying everything to get my mom's attention. I think I realized I was doing it the day I got sent to juvenile hall. Usually I'd just go to the ADAPT Center¹ when I was in trouble, but the last time I ran away, when I was about twelve, I was sent to the St. James Parish Juvenile Detention Center in New Orleans for ten days. I was hurt and mad the day my mama came to see me in juvenile hall. But then I finally realized I shouldn't be doing all this, and when I went home to my grandmother's I just got myself back together.

I got pregnant at seventeen, and my boyfriend and I got an apartment together. I had my first son, Emmanuel, when I was a junior in high school, but I still graduated with a 3.8 GPA. I got help. For instance, there was this lady from Africa who'd opened a school for teen moms. She got government funding to open it, and she'd look after the students' babies, all the way till they were able to go to Head Start.² I didn't have to bring diapers, food, nothing. All I did was drop him off every day, and that was a blessing.

After I graduated high school in 2004 my then-boyfriend and I headed to Augusta, Georgia, in a raggedy car to live with my mom. But my mom let me down, and six months later I moved back to Louisiana to start all over again. I started Bryman College at the beginning of 2005 and I met my new boyfriend, who is now my husband. And then, that August, Hurricane Katrina hit. Before the storm reached us, I got in a car with my boyfriend and baby, and we started heading toward Georgia. We stayed with a friend of my brother's, which was a hectic situation every day. It was only a two-bedroom

¹ A social work and child resources organization.

² A federal program promoting school readiness for young children (ages three to five) in low-income families by offering educational, nutritional, health, and social services.

apartment, but at least it wasn't a shelter. During that time, I wrote a lot of bad checks because it was hard for me to get a job. I didn't have money for food, and you know, it was just a lot that we were dealing with. It was the only way really at the time that we could get anything.

Eventually I got a job at McDonald's. My brother was working, and my dad was coming up with some money to send us so we could maybe rent a trailer or something. But then three or four weeks after we got out here, I spoke with my mom, and eventually she let us stay with her.

I'd Made This Huge Mistake, and I Regretted It

By the end of 2007, I had two kids and was four months pregnant with another. I was living in Marietta, Georgia, and working two jobs, at Kmart and Pep Boys.

Well, one day I got an idea. I had a friend at Kmart who used to do fake refunds. She'd say a customer was coming in and she was refunding stuff that wasn't really being refunded. So I did it the first time and I didn't get caught, but of course I was scared. I said to my friend, "We didn't get caught. Let's not do it again." But we really needed the money. I was behind on a lot of bills, and I was trying to catch it up.

One night, my friend came through my line to check out little items like diapers and different things—some of the things I needed—and I didn't charge her for everything; diapers and stuff like that I would never ring up. We would do that a lot.

That night the Kmart loss prevention officer was outside smoking a cigarette, but I didn't see him at the time. When I got ready to close up, he called me and my friend to the back, and of course they'd caught it on tape. He asked us how long we'd been doing it, and I lied, "This is my first time." And then he basically told me, "Write what I tell you to write, and then I'll let you go home."

I think the total he had us taking was \$1,200 worth of stuff, and I said, "I didn't take that much," because we'd only taken \$300 worth. But he said, "But we have other stuff that's been taken," even though I told him I hadn't taken any of that.

Then he said, "Well, we're gonna press charges." I think he was trying to save his job at the time, 'cause they've got to catch people,

and I don't think he'd been doing too good in that department. I got arrested and taken to jail that night, but I bonded out.

About two months later, I got a letter in the mail saying there was an arraignment. I honestly thought it was for Kmart, but when I got to court, I found out it was for Pep Boys—I'd been doing the same thing there. The judge was sending everybody to jail that day, and I was totally scared. So I got up there, and the Pep Boys loss prevention officer said he'd called his manager because he really felt bad for me. He said I was a good worker, and that he knew the situation I was in. He said, "Well, I asked my manager if there's a way that you can make payments, but he's not budging. He says it's too much." It came to something like \$700. The judge put me on a bond on my own recognizance. She basically let me go home that day without my needing to post bail, and told me that I needed to turn myself in the following night. It was like her trusting me that I was going to come back. She said, "I think you made a very bad mistake. I want you to go home, pick your kids up from day care, and make sure they're stable. Tomorrow at nine o'clock, you need to turn yourself in."

In my mind, I was thinking, *Okay, well, I've never been in trouble before, so the only thing they can do is put me on probation.* And that's all I kept saying to myself. But when I finally got to court, I got a court-appointed lawyer, and he said, "Well, the judge is saying eighteen months." And I was like, "Huh? I've never been in trouble before! I can pay the money back!" At the time I had \$1,500 on me, which I'd saved from my taxes. My lawyer talked to the prosecutor, who said, "No. She's got to serve time."

Then my lawyer told me, "Go home for the weekend and get yourself together with your kids." He said, "The only thing I can say is that I'll try and talk the prosecutor down. Any other judge, and I think you would've been okay. But I don't think she's gonna budge."

So I went home and finally I called my grandmother, my dad, and everybody, and let them know what was going on. Of course they were all shocked, because I had never said anything about it before. That weekend was real, real hard. I was scared, because I didn't want to leave my kids. I guess it just hurt me because I'd never been in trouble, and I was doing all I could to stay out of trouble. But I'd made this huge mistake and I regretted it. I think that was the most

that I felt—regret. Leaving my kids—I didn't know how to handle that part.

And so that Monday came, February 18, 2008. I had to be in court at nine. I told my oldest son, "Mommy might have to go away for a while to help some people. But once I've helped them, I'll be home." My husband kept saying, "You're not going. You're not going." When I got to court, every part of me just knew what would happen.

So I got in front of the judge and I said to her, "I'm truly sorry. But you know, I have never been in trouble before this. I just graduated from college and I'm pregnant. This is not what I thought I would be doing right now." The judge had her head down the whole time; she looked real, real sad. And then she said, "The only thing I can say is that I have to send you to jail, because your codefendant has already gone. But I'm sorry. I think you're on the right track. I think you just made a mistake that you've got to serve the consequences for." I was sentenced to a year, and the judge said, "Hopefully, you'll do six months on good behavior, with nine years' probation." And I thought, *Okay, so you're going to send me to jail. And then I have to pay all this money back—one hundred a month until it's paid back—and then probation for nine years. Nine years.*

They Shackled My Stomach and My Feet

When the court bailiff took me from the court to a holding cell in Georgia, a guard put the cuffs around my belly and on my wrists, like a chain. When I sat down, the cuffs were real, real tight, so I was basically standing up the whole time. For a while, I was complaining about how tight it was, and other inmates were complaining too. Finally the guard came back and loosened the chain around my belly, and then I was able to sit down. The whole process was just long, and I was hungry and tired.

I think the thing that upset me the most was that they wouldn't give me water in a cup. I was not about to drink out of this faucet where you wash your hands; it was right over the toilet bowl. So I just stayed thirsty. By the time I did finally go through the holding cell, the guards gave me a sandwich to eat. Then they took us all on upstairs to the jail, and once I got upstairs, one of the female guards

told me, "I won't be able to put you in a bottom bunk until you go see the doctor and he says you're pregnant." I was six months pregnant. I said, "No, for real?! You want me to climb this bunk bed?" She said, "Well, I can't give you a bottom bunk." I just said, "Ma'am, I can't climb this." And then she just walked out. Another inmate told me, "You can have my bed." So she put her stuff on the top bunk, and I took the bottom. And finally I went to sleep.

I was there about a month before I actually saw a doctor. I didn't have vitamins there, and I had no prenatal care. I didn't really complain if I was in pain or anything, because the infirmary was real nasty. There was poo on the walls. It was just nasty. Then one day, when I was seven months pregnant, the guards called me down. They shackled my stomach and my feet and took me to see an OB-GYN. I mean, you walk like this through the front door looking as if you've murdered someone, and I just thought it was really degrading. I know I made a mistake, but I don't think I deserved to be ashamed or embarrassed in this way. And even once I'd got in the back where the actual doctors' offices were, the shackles didn't come off. They took them off my feet, but nothing else; the shackles stayed on my stomach.

The doctor complained that I wasn't getting enough water, vitamins, or fresh fruits, and that it could affect my baby's brain. The county doesn't give you fruits, and it's not like I could buy them. So I just tried to drink as much water as I possibly could.

My kids came to visit me sometimes with my boyfriend. My boys were five and three then. The first time they came was really hard. They were beating on the glass, trying to come through it. I was so mad at myself for putting them through this.

It felt like my pregnancy was the only thing that was keeping me going. I was eight months pregnant when I finally left the county jail and went to prison.

Nobody Cares If You're Pregnant

When I was moved to prison in Pennsylvania, I couldn't take my books that had been sent to me in jail, or anything like that. I had one picture and I had my Bible, but all the rest I had to send home.

I was taken to prison with other inmates in a cramped, hot van. Some of them were also pregnant. When we got there and were getting off the van, the guards started yelling at us, "Nobody cares if you're pregnant! You shouldn't have got in trouble. You're a sad excuse for a mother. You don't care about your kids!" It was a mess. It was real hard. There was another girl there who was pregnant, and she'd been there before. She said to me, "Don't let them get to you, girl." But they had already gotten to me. I just felt like this wasn't the place I was supposed to be.

The guards wanted me to stand up straight, but I couldn't. I was totally drained because I hadn't slept since three that morning. I was eight months along at this point, and I was huge. Eventually, one of the male guards said, "Okay, go get her a wheelchair." The female guards were actually harder on me. So I got in a wheelchair, and they rolled me on inside. When I got inside, the guards made me strip, bend over, all that. Then they made me take a shower, and afterward they gave me a sandwich and a juice. You would think that they'd give you more food, being pregnant, but they don't. You just eat what everybody else eats.

It was a whole process. I had to learn how to talk to the guards, and that I had to address them with "Ma'am" or "Sir" and "Good morning." Or when they walked by, I had to stop. I had to ask permission to speak. Finally they gave me all my stuff in a bag to put on the bed.

I couldn't carry the bag like they wanted me to. There's a certain way you had to hold it, a certain way to walk, and I just kept dropping it. It was about ten pounds—it's your clothes, it's everything in there—and I wasn't even supposed to be lifting that. But the guards kept yelling, "You'd better not drop it again!" And I was like, "Uh, ma'am, this is heavy. I'm trying my best."

When I got in the dorm, the inmates were pretty cool and they helped me make my bed. I think, with most of the women in there being mothers, they could imagine how it felt to go through this while pregnant. Most of them were pretty understanding, and they didn't mind helping me out as much as they could.

My family was very supportive. My grandmother made sure that I had money in my account, my dad and uncles too. My mama did

I was fortunate, you know. One of the guards there gave me her cell phone because she didn't agree with a lot of what was going on. She said, "Call your boyfriend. Let him know you had the baby." She let me talk to him until the phone died. It was a blessing.

It Felt Like My Baby Was Dying

After I left the hospital, my boyfriend picked up the baby and took him home. I guess for me, walking out of that hospital, knowing I was leaving my son—it killed me inside. I felt like I was being punished for the one mistake that I'd made in my life. I just remember looking at my baby, and kissing him, and crying, and not wanting to go. The nurse who was holding him was really hurt too. She asked me, "Do you want to kiss him again?" And I kissed him one last time, and they took me out the door.⁴

It felt like my baby was dying, that I was abandoning him. I felt like I owed it to him to be there, and I wasn't. I felt like maybe he would hate me, or resent me, or when I got home, he wouldn't know who I was. It hurt. It just hurt.

I got back to the prison with staples in because of the c-section. But I couldn't go back to the dorm until the staples came out, and so, on top of me being hurt and stressed, they put me in this infirmary with nothing but four walls. I didn't have any of my personal property, and there was no TV, nothing.

I was supposed to stay there through the weekend. During that time, I had nobody to talk to, and all I could really do was cry. I didn't want

⁴ Most prisons separate parents and their newborn infants after 48 hours. As well as causing emotional distress, the separation of mothers and their children also threatens the health of infants by posing serious barriers to breastfeeding. The Fifth Circuit of Appeals ruled in the 1981 case *Dike v. School Board of Orange County, Florida*, that the right to nurse is protected by the Fourteenth Amendment. However, the same court determined in *Southerland v. Thigpen* that the state could overlook this guarantee in prison. Some states, like New York, have taken steps to recognize the universality of this right, guaranteeing women in prison the ability to breastfeed their children for a year after birth, though in other states the reality of prison life has rendered breastfeeding impossible.

In at least thirteen states, babies can be placed in prison nurseries, though access is often limited to women with short sentences for nonviolent offenses, and some parents prefer for their children to be raised outside prison walls.

to eat, I didn't want to do anything. And then one of the guards told me, "Well, if you don't eat, we're going to make you stay here longer." So I made myself eat because I didn't want to stay in there that long. All that was going to do was drive me more crazy than I already was.

By then I was mad at everything. I was mad at myself. I was mad at my mom. I was mad at everybody. I had only been back there but about five weeks from the hospital, and I got in a fight. It was with a girl who was looking for trouble, and she picked a fight with me one night. She hit me and hit me, and I fought her back. So of course, they took us to lockdown. That's the worst place to be. I mean, you can't look out the windows because they're all blacked out, and you can only bathe on certain days. I was down there for three weeks. My birthday was July 18th, and I was in lockdown for that. But my mom sent me a whole bunch of cards and pictures, and I would call my grandma, and she'd be like, "You still down there?" And I'd say, "Yes."

The day I got out of lockdown was the day I got the news that I was going home on August 14. I had two weeks left! I thought, *Thank God! Finally!* I stayed up the whole night before the 14th—I was so excited, and I just wanted to leave. I was just so ready to get out of there.

All Storms End

When I got out of prison, my boyfriend came to get me. At that time, his mom had the two younger kids and my grandmother had my oldest son. It took me a while to get the kids back. I missed them terribly, but things were bad. The gas in the house had been turned off, the phone was off, the cable was off. The truck I had was gone, and my credit was totally messed up. Everything was in a total wreck. I couldn't be bringing the kids back into that type of situation. I wanted to be able to have food stamps first, and I wanted to try to get the house together. It was nasty, it was dirty. I was just in a depressed situation, and I was upset with my boyfriend, who wasn't working at that time. I was mad because I'd left him with \$1,500, and he got money every month from my dad and my grandmother, so I couldn't understand the house being in a total wreck when I got out of prison.

Olivia Hamilton, Robin LeVine
I was totally mad about my money, and why everything was gone. I also felt a lot of resentment toward society.

Eventually, I was able to get a job at the food court. I saved up, and I got a car. Once I got the car, I could get back and forth to work. And finally, when we were more financially stable, we got the kids back.

Once I got out, I got in the church. I always was in church, but I strayed for a while when I first moved out here to Georgia. But once I got out of prison, I joined a choir and I went to Bible study and Sunday school. And, you know, I got myself back together for me and God. For me and school. For me and work.

Eventually I got laid off from the food court because they didn't have enough work for me, and it's been totally hard for me to find a job since. Whenever I'm filling out a job application, I get scared when I get to that question where I have to put down that I have this conviction. I feel like I'll never have the opportunity to explain what happened. So it's like, do you lie, or do you tell the truth? And, you know, every time I get to that question, I stumble.

I think my medical treatment in prison was cruel, degrading, and shameful. Being shackled, being forced to have that c-section—it was the worst feeling, mentally and emotionally, that I have ever been through. And I feel like it would be so unfair for me to have been through all this and not say anything about it to somebody. I always felt like everything I went through was definitely for a reason, and that it made me a stronger person. So my goal now is to help prevent somebody else from making the same mistakes, with the stealing, the whole scenario. Right now I'm working with young women through my church. I want to work with these young women because when you get to a certain age, there are things you go through, there's pressure to do things that you may not want to do. I've also been without a mom, and I know how it feels to want that. There's a gap in your heart where you need it. A grandmother's love is awesome, but a mom's love is something totally different.

Through God, all things are possible. Even though I was mad at my boyfriend and my mom, God has built those relationships again. Now my mom and I share a beautiful relationship, and my boyfriend is now my husband. This shows that all storms end and the sun will shine again.