

# **“FAMILY”**

(An essay written by: Tasha Mercedes Shelby)

Dedicated to: Dakota, Devin, Aunt Linda, Grandma, Michael, Marty, Jacob, Toni, Sai-Ra, Holland & Merrick – my family

I always imagine waking up and everything in the past 15 years is all just one horrible nightmare. Everyday reality sets in though. That is when I realize this is real. Very real! Almost as if, I am Bill Murray in that movie, Groundhog Day. I am just trapped, day after day, living the same life. Continuously; a daily life of prison.

The hardest part about all of this is the effects of the family bond. No matter where you are or who you are, you can relate to family, whether your blood relative or any other kind. The devastation of being ripped apart is beyond anything that can be put into words. There is a loss of identity without these loved ones on a daily basis. Family is how we define ourselves as humans. Without them, it is as if you become a shadow of your former self. All you thought you could have amounted to haunts you like a ghost. You do not just lose loved ones in here; you lose you.

Prison officials try to make it “seem” as if they encourage this unity of family. Perhaps in other states this is the case. However, in “good ‘ole Mississippi”, I have little proof that this is happening for the overall system. They (officials) make it so hard on the family. They are not the “prisoners”, yet what they have to endure is at times full of humiliation. They are searched, person and vehicle; they are subjected to the way the prison staff may speak to their family member or the other surrounding inmates. At one time, they had to endure drug screening on sight. You cannot fathom how many countless families were turned away after driving for hours, sometimes even from other states, such as mine, only to later learn these so-called drug tests were faulty because the wardens and supervisors were failing them as well. The staff expect no prolong moments of touching. You barely have time for a hug, before someone is barking at you to stop. If there is a child, your own child, niece, nephew, or grandbaby, they discourage you from walking around with them without another adult family member. If someone’s family is willing to stand by her, to come see her, continue to love her, give hope and encourage her, why make things harder on that family? Prison does its best, or so it seems, to disband the ties that bind.

I can only imagine what anxiety my family is feeling on days they know there is a visit. The preparations of that trip; the emotions. While we are visiting, each side puts on this brave face for the other as if everything is okay. Inside, both are trying to hold it all back; family not wanting you to know their pain and you doing the same for them. However, the pain is there, always there, even if unspoken. Don’t get me wrong, you are happy for these brief moments, but then what. What for them? What for you? Business as usual? That is hardly the case.

I do not know the statistics, though I am almost certain these families, are an "elite" group (to say the least). The stigma that must follow these loved ones. For me personally is heartbreaking.

What this has done, is split my children and me apart from one another. I have a daughter in the world that was only 15 days old when we were torn away from each other's life. She does not even know that I exist. How can we ever recover from that? Has her life been better because I am not in it? Is there anyone out there that cares to know that though she may have not needed me, I have certainly needed her?

My son is 18 years old now. Can someone please make me understand why they allowed him to believe I was in Texas until he was eight years old? He had memories of me. The question here is not why did they do this to me, but why to him? When he was 15, he got into some trouble. He was sent to a private facility so that he would not have to endure jail. The moment he was out from under the thumb of those who had raised him: through technology, he found and reached out to me. To think that before that moment in time I thought the worst of the advances out there in this new world I know nothing about. To think the very night, December 1, 2009, his first letter reached my hand was the night I intended to take my own life. Fifteen years without contact, then at the moment I needed something more than I had ever needed it before, it came.

Regardless of your preferred spiritual beliefs, you have to admit, that was nothing short of miraculous. It lasted six months, this exchange between mother and son, trying to play "catch up". He soon was back with his great-grandmother, and the bond we were attempting to regain had ended. A bond that, no matter what or who, has proved to be unbreakable.

He has reached out to me again. Only this time he is in prison. This time he is letting me know the resentment and anger he harbors. Not towards me, but towards those who kept him from me. I not only needed him, he certainly has needed me. Now, prison to prison, we are finally building something again. Holding on to pieces of a past we each vaguely remember of one another. Look at the cost though, years of separation, years of missed firsts. Even now with communication - we cannot talk, we cannot hug, and there is no seeing each other eye-to-eye, face to face. You cannot measure the amount of hurt. I now know this life of prison, more than I knew my previous life. This will be the life my son, my baby boy; will live for the next 6-17 years. Pure heartache for everyone involved. The effect is on another generation now.

In my 22-year-old mind, I truly believed I was doing what was best for my babies. There was no way I could have foreseen that the family members I had entrusted my precious children's lives to would purposely keep us apart and keep

them apart from one another as well. They not only grew up without me, they grew up without each other. These individuals led me to believe things would be different. Very different. I trusted them. Either they would be with people I knew or the alternative; they would be wards of the state. I had to make quick decisions, decisions that I now cannot change. I allowed paternal family members to have custody. I believed this would be a temporary situation. They would still be close to me in Mississippi, I would have weekly contact and visits with them each and I would be back home with them shortly. Little did I know that it would turn into what has seemed to be a permanent aspect of life. My family in Texas had offered to get them and look out for them. I figured by the time that all the paper work was sorted out from the out of state process, I would be home first. Hindsight, right? Never did I imagine that fifteen years would have passed me up at this point passed us all up by now. Never...

On the other hand, I have a family; my family in Texas has stood by me. They have loved me through the hurt. Not once turning away from me, or thinking the worst of me. As much as they have been here for me, there are still so many things I have missed. Life for them continues even when mine seems to have stopped. The relationship though, is as solid as it is strained. Solid because when someone in the family (me) needed more than you could imagine, walking away and leaving me on my own was not their option. Strained because the toll this must take on them: emotionally, mentally, physically and financially. The toll this has all taken on me.

The effects of incarceration on a family are far reaching. The pain I bare is not mine alone. My brothers and sisters have lost their big sister. They were so young when I went away. I believe this is where the effects are most noticeable. They are all grown; some with kids of their own, two have had marriages and still some with heartaches of their own. Yet, where was I when advice was needed or a shoulder to cry on, when baby showers should have been thrown by me – nieces and nephews were born? My Aunt Linda has single handedly done more for me than any other. The depth of love she has given me during this whole ordeal, the support in every way imaginable, is something I can never thank her enough for. They are here for me as a whole. There is so much I wish I could do. Living in such different worlds, I long to *share in* their lives so desperately.

The effects of the family relationship; no matter how close we have remained; no matter how unconditional they have loved me. The loss within at times consumes the soul. As grateful as I am for what I have, I still long to wake up. Wake up from this reality. Let the credits roll! I am not Bill Murray though. I do have more than most. Even as much as this whole ordeal has extended its arms and touched the deepest parts of the places within us all that know only pain. I

have them and for what it's worth, they have me. Family relationships; I would have not made it this far without that in which I do have.

This has taught me that no matter what the obstacles, families have staying power. At least mine does. They love you through the good and the bad. I am now 37 years old, I have life w/o parole, and how lucky am I that I do not have life w/o my family!