

# Hmm DAILY

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## Locked Up in Shame



by **Lori Teresa Yearwood**

“You look so much better than you did,” she said.

Tall and dark-skinned, a tattoo on her right forearm, she stood patiently, waiting for me to recognize her.

“I know you?” I said, untying my store apron. It was the end of my eight-hour shift as a grocery cashier and I was standing in one of the store’s cafeteria-style eating areas, exhausted.

“Yes—jail,” she said.

My gaze shot through the store’s picture window, past the parking lot, all the way to the tops of the majestic Wasatch Mountains that line Salt Lake County, Utah.

“You were naked,” my interlocutor added.

Instantly my mind retreated, folding in on itself in shame.

**There are** 2.3 million people behind bars in the United States, a country that jails more people per capita than any other nation in the world.

I was never supposed to be a statistic.

My father was a microbiologist at NASA Ames Research center. My mother was the CEO of a nonprofit. I was a college graduate who went on to become a journalist and then a business owner. And then, inconceivably, I was a traumatized, homeless woman who was arrested seven times for lying naked on the side of a busy street in Salt Lake City.

This is my story, but it’s also the story of what happens to the millions of people funneled into the correctional system. As is the case for virtually anyone who is jailed, a lot of truly horrible things happened before I was incarcerated. Yet somehow, jail was my absolute rock bottom. The concrete walls and steel bars were just the tangible part of it; the confinement was figurative as much as it was literal, sealing me within the shame and trauma that had brought me there in the first place.



**When I** was first admitted to the Salt Lake County Adult Detention Center, and a jail employee handed me paperwork to fill out, I purposefully left the spot blank that asked for the name and number of an emergency contact. All of my relationships had disintegrated in the chaos preceding my homelessness; I had no safety net then, and I did not perceive myself to have any. I stared at her in silence.

“But what if you die here?” the woman said, from behind her glass window.

My life had become so unreal that I could not fully contemplate the question. I had just had my mugshot taken, was wearing a stiff cotton, navy blue jumpsuit, and was awaiting my sentencing. I was 51 years old. Until my homelessness, I had never been arrested.

My cell, which I shared with another woman, was 8 feet by 10 feet and contained a bunk bed and a metal toilet and sink. Showers were in a common area, outside the cells, but

you had to ask the guards to use them. I chose to give myself bird baths inside my cell; I felt terribly intimidated by the guards, especially the women, who sometimes stopped all jail activities, and commanded us to stand still so that they could frisk us, swiping their hands beneath our breasts and then our genitals to see if we were hiding any contraband in the crevices of our bodies.



The general population jail cells where Lori Yearwood was first put during her six month incarceration

Throughout the day, the guard behind the downstairs counter would press a button, unlocking the cell doors. You could hear clusters of doors opening in a collective, loud swish. That's when we could leave our cells and either sit at the downstairs tables, which were anchored into the cement floor, or walk around the circumference of the room, in endless circles, clockwise and then counter-clockwise.

There was an adjoining, cage-like "recreation area" that small groups were allowed to enter for short periods of time—an area where you could look up and see the sky.

It was a stark contrast to everything I had known before. My last home had been on a 100-acre horse ranch in Oregon, where I had lived with my two Arabian horses, Vashka and Raya, my two dogs, Luna and Allie, and my three cats, Marmalade, Africa and Di-Di.

Once a week, the commissary carts rolled into the area and the jail employees called out a long list of names and dispersed bags of treats: potato chips, bags of instant coffee, candy and chocolates. Chocolate is my all-time favorite food. But the only person who

had left money on my books was a man who had assaulted me, and I refused, even in my worst moments, to accept anything from him. So my name was never called. Commissary times were my loneliest moments—the only times I allowed myself to lie on my bed, cover my head with a pillow, and sob.

Within days of being in jail, I mostly stopped joining the other prisoners, choosing instead to stay on my bunk bed, eyes shut, mind retreating.



**Standing in** the cafeteria of the upscale grocery, I gave the tattooed woman my Cliff's Notes version of how I wound up in jail with her.

First my house burned down, I told her. I moved into a small carpenter's shed in the back of my mother's house. Three months later, my mother was diagnosed with cancer. A few months after that, she died, and one of my business customers invited me to move with her onto her sprawling ranch in Northern Oregon. Then my dog was diagnosed with cancer, and engulfed with the compounded grief and stress of all that had already occurred, I became unable to run my business, and shut it down. When I couldn't find another job to pay the rent, my landlord understandably asked me to leave.

I couch-surfed at friends' homes and even stayed at a New Age monastery in Utah for a few months. After that, I wound up in a homeless shelter. There a transient man, who worked in a homeless outreach center, spotted my obvious vulnerability and lack of street smarts, and began stalking me. Then he abducted, beat, and sexually assaulted me. After he left town, three other men molested me.

Wildly distraught, I began lying naked on the side of a street, near a food pantry where I had been picking up my free sack lunches everyday.

"And that's when I got put in jail," I told the woman.

"That would do it," she said.

We stood there in the cafeteria, neither one of us speaking. What could I say?

"Life is humbling," she said finally, breaking the silence.

Yes, I thought. Immeasurably so.



**My crimes**, non-violent though they were, would keep me in that sprawling, concrete building from Sept of 2016 to March of 2017—six months and two days, to be exact.

While I was there, something happened to me that I would only later understand. My mind shattered once again.

“Trauma is multiplied in jail,” said Terry Kupers, a professor emeritus at the Wright Institute Graduate School of Psychology and author of the books *Prison Madness* and *Solitary: The Inside Story of Supermax Isolation and How We Can Abolish It*.

For women who have been previously traumatized, especially those who have been sexually abused—and therefore almost always also verbally demeaned and attacked—the shaming that occurs in incarceration “re-awakens the trauma and the shame attached to that early trauma,” Kupers told me.

My breaking point: One night after dinner, a guard announced that those who wanted to could shower. I went to the downstairs desk and picked up my razor, went back to my room and shaved my legs at the sink. When I was done, I threw the razor in the trash can behind the guard’s desk. Minutes later, he asked me where I had put the razor.

Frozen in terror, I did not answer him. By that time in homelessness, I had stopped talking to anyone, as whenever I spoke to the transient man who had assaulted me, he found a way to inflict more pain. Silence, it seemed to me, had saved my life.

The guard ordered me to my cell upstairs, where I was followed by two other guards who searched the room in vain for the razor. When they couldn’t find it, I was handcuffed and taken back downstairs, where I was told to sit down and was, in addition to the handcuffs, shackled at my feet. I sat in the chair until my back and neck and shoulders ached, and the guards found the razor in the trash can by the desk.

Soon after that, I began undressing in my cell. I have read that, often, animals mimic a state akin to a fake death so that they will not fully feel the final attack of their predators. That resonates with me.

Regardless, my behavior soon landed me in the psychiatric ward of the jail, where I, like every other prisoner on that ward, was put in a cell by myself. I was not forced to take any medication, but on numerous occasions, I watched guards in riot gear mount the stairs across the cell from my cell to administer a shot to a woman in an upstairs cell. I could hear her screaming in protest. Afterward, there was only the sound of soft crying, and then total silence.

In that ward, “outside time” was cut in half, less than half that of the general population. I slipped even further into myself, spending my time drawing and writing about my horses, choosing to never go outside. My fingernail beds turned white and my hair began to fall out.



An illustration I drew in jail. My mom is sitting in her wheelchair on her porch, my cat, Marmalade on her lap, my horse Raya reaching for a horse cookie that is in my mother’s hand.

I remember almost everything that happened during my journey in and out of homelessness, but I have lost almost all memory of the months between January and March. One day it was New Year’s and the next day, it seemed, it was spring.



**Handcuffed and** once again shackled—the shackles cutting into my ankles and making them bleed—I finally stood in front of a judge who told me that I had spent enough time in jail and released me. A guard handed me an envelope with a \$50 bill in it and as I walked out the front door and into the cold spring air, I was immediately accosted by the transient man who had repeatedly assaulted me.

He followed me onto a train and asked if I wanted to go to coffee with him. I remained silent, and he finally left me alone. That night I slept on the park bench on the outskirts of Salt Lake City, my intermittent bed over the past year.

The last time I stepped away from that bench was in May of 2017.

With a nearly three-year gap in my employment history, as well as a plea in abeyance for misdemeanor charges for public lewdness, the \$11-an-hour cashiering job was the best first job I could land. So I took it.

For nine months, I tied my black apron around my waist, punched my time clock, and stood behind my register. On the days when my supervisors handed me a timer so that I could keep track of my breaks, I got so frustrated with my circumstances that I cried in the bathroom.

“The American dream is that anyone can become anything they want to become if they work hard enough and have enough talent,” said Kupers, who, in addition to authoring his books, has testified in more than two dozen class action lawsuits about jail and prison conditions, including the quality of mental health care on the “inside.”

“The underside is that if you are not happy with what you have become, then you have only yourself to blame.”



As I stood behind my register, the unwanted conversations usually began like this: “Don’t I know you from somewhere?”

There was the woman who remembered me from all the times I had walked up to her tiny, bar-lined window at a downtown church food pantry, and asked every day, sometimes several times a day, for a free ham and cheese sandwich and cup of coffee. Just months earlier, I had been sleeping on a park bench. Now, behind my counter, with an air of purposeful nonchalance, I pretended not to remember her.

I was still too ashamed of my collapse into homelessness to be grateful for the long climb out of it, and the grocery-store job was at that time, in my mind, a sign of my original fall from middle class grace.

So I was mortified to see the tall, balding man with the striped green tie, the one whose thin face filled with such unbearable compassion that I wished I could disappear through the rubber mat beneath my feet. “Lori!” he said. “I remember you from the library! We cared about you, Lori.”

Oh. The library...the warm place where I had sought refuge; where I had sat, paralyzed, for hours upon hours, for days and weeks and then years; where I had prayed unceasingly about all the things that had happened, kept happening, and seemed as if they would never stop happening.

“Now is not the time for an extended conversation,” I said, effectively shutting down any further communication. He walked quietly away, a confused look in his eyes.

Then there was the time that a woman who burst into tears as I rang up her hotbar meal.

“Oh my God, do you remember me from the Sunday morning feedings for the homeless in Pioneer Park?” she asked.

I remembered the meals, sometimes the only hot food I ate all week. It was good and people there were kind. I couldn’t, however, place her face, now crumpled with emotion.

“Look at you! Oh my God, what a blessing to see you now!”

I felt guilty about my inability to negotiate my customer’s reaction to me, until I had the opportunity to interview Bret Lyon, the co-director of the Center for Healing Shame in Berkeley, California. The organization trains mainstream therapists to be able to recognize and address shame with their clients.

“Most shaming is not done intentionally,” Lyon said. “Her response was a classical example of people getting caught in their own material: she got lost in her own story.”

Ideally, the way to relate to someone who has come out of collapse is to focus on the positive of the present moment, Lyons said. Conversely, if someone is in the midst of collapse, a way to approach that person—a way to remind them of strength in them—would be to talk about the successes of the past.

“Something like: ‘Wow it’s so wonderful that you are doing this now, to see you here now,’” Lyon said, “Or, ‘Remember when you were working before — I know you can do that again.’”



**Amidst** the bustle of the upscale Whole Foods in Salt Lake City, I asked my former jail mate’s name and we shook hands.

Her name was Lalia, and she was a recovering addict, she said. After being put in jail on drug charges, she entered into a court program that helped her find housing and a job as a food server, where she said people often treated her like “an idiot.”

I never thought I would have so much in common with a recovering drug addict recently released from jail. Yet there we were, both of us doing the best we could to overcome the internal — and external — barricades threatening to hold us back.

Shame is embedded in the body as well as the mind, Bret Lyon, co-director of the Center for Healing Shame in Berkeley, California, said. “It’s the problem that underlies almost everything, but that few are talking about. It’s the reason it is so hard to come out of poverty—because it is the inherent belief that ‘there is something wrong with me.’ ”

The practical repercussions are tangible: Someone who believes they are intrinsically broken does not think they are worthy of living wage jobs, promotions and sizeable 401(k)’s. Instead, they buy into the stigmas projected onto them—that they are malfeasant, lazy, and definitely not to be trusted. Therefore, they hope to survive, but rarely to thrive.

I don’t know what happened to Laila. When I texted her to tell her that this story was about to be published, someone else texted back and said that Laila was gone and that I should never try to reach out to Laila again.



**Violent crime** rates have dropped by 49 percent between 1993 and 2017, according to data collected by the [FBI](#).

Yet state and local spending on prisons and jails has increased at triple the rate of funding for public education and preschool through P-12 education in the last three decades, according to a 2016 analysis by the [U.S. Department of Education](#).

Once released, the stigma of having been incarcerated is enforced economically and psychologically: Those with criminal histories are often turned down for everything from apartment leases to anything but the lowest paying jobs.

A 2018 report from [Prison Policy Initiative](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/outofwork.html) says that joblessness for people with criminal records is almost five times the rate of the general public.  
<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/outofwork.html>

Of those who do find work during their first year after release, half earn less than \$10,000 a year, which is less than a full time job at minimum wage, according to a 2018 report from [The Brookings Institute](#).

The people who emerge from deep collapse and go on to thrive in mainstream life are the “outliers” Professor Kupers says. “They grasp the social inequity of their circumstances and don’t blame just themselves for what went wrong in their lives. Therefore they are more assertive and less vulnerable to shame.”



**One day** at lunchtime, one of my former defense attorneys appeared at my register.

Days earlier, a judge had been told about the assaults that led to my charges, and had dismissed each of those charges, ending my year-and-a-half-long probation six months early.

As one of my supervisors swept the floor nearby, I scrambled for words, somehow managing to convey in non-specific, sweeping statements, that hinted at our relationship but didn’t disclose it, that I would like to have my record completely expunged. (An expungement means that your record becomes non-existent, as opposed to showing the word “dismissed.”) My attorney wrote the telephone number of a free legal clinic on an empty paper bag. Then she took her salad and burritos and walked away.

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Lori Teresa Yearwood. Photo: Cass Studios of Salt Lake City

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*Lori Teresa Yearwood's work can be found at [loriyearwood.com](http://loriyearwood.com)*