

Jennifer's story automatically struck a chord with me since she was the first woman I interviewed from my home state of Georgia. Growing up in rural Georgia, just ninety miles from where I was born, neither Jennifer, nor I, could ever have imagined the circumstances that would bring us together.

What caught my attention about Jennifer's first letter was the level of desperation that reverberated throughout her eight page handwritten letter. However, it was a statement she made in her second paragraph that completely floored me. *"I have been through hell and continue to go through hell for a crime I didn't have any knowledge of."* And with that, I stopped. As naïve as it feels to me now, I had not considered the fact that any of my participants would proclaim their innocence. And, from the overall tone of Jennifer's letter, it was obvious to me that she was reaching out in the hopes that I might help get her conviction overturned. This was definitely not something I had anticipated.

I pondered hard before I wrote Jennifer back. The champion of lost causes in me wanted to mount a campaign to save her, but the practical side of me reconsidered when I thought about the commitments I'd made to the other women I was interviewing. In the end, I explained to Jennifer, and she agreed, that the best way I could help her was to tell her story in the most compelling way possible. Perhaps with her story we could draw the attention of someone who could help her with her legal struggles.

Over the course of our working together, Jennifer became a lot more to me than just a subject to investigate. I looked forward to her letters that were filled with as much encouragement for me, as they were optimism about her future. And while Jennifer confesses that she has made plenty of mistakes in her life, not once did I ever doubt her desire for a better life. This is Jennifer's story.

A Cry for Help

Filicide, the crime for which Jennifer is convicted, is defined as the act of killing one's own child. From past research, I knew that most women convicted of filicide were often times victims of childhood abuses themselves. Because of this, I wanted to start by having Jennifer describe for me her childhood experiences and her relationships with her parents. In reference to her mother Jennifer had this to say, *"Me and my mom argued all the time because she was jealous and harsh to me. She couldn't stand me being happy. She was always very jealous of who I am."*

When I asked Jennifer to describe her relationship with her biological father, she explained that he had left Georgia to join the Army before she was born. It wasn't until his mother died in 1982, that he returned to Georgia and met his then eight year old daughter, Jennifer, for the first time. *"He had been trying to be a dad to me, but my mother wouldn't let me have any contact with him because she was angry with him."* When I inquired as to why her mother was so angry with her father, Jennifer stated, *"Because he went into the military to do something productive with his life."* Jennifer describes her relationship with her father today as a good one. However, she does admit that her father has not hidden his disappointment in the fact that she has gone to prison.

When Jennifer was seven, her mother married a man named Johnny that would come to play a tremendously destructive role in her life. When I requested Jennifer describe her relationship with Johnny, she stated emphatically, *"I didn't like my stepdad. He would abuse us kids and my mom both physically and mentally. Myself, personally, he molested me. He would threaten me and would tell my mom lies about me when I wouldn't do what he wanted me to do."*

He would force me to perform oral sex acts and would perform them on me. He would force me to watch pornographic movies all the time when my mom wasn't around." The molestation, Jennifer affirmed, had begun when she was nine and continued on until help finally arrived for her at the age of thirteen.

Curious, I asked Jennifer if she had ever told her mother what her stepfather was doing to her. Her answer was as straightforward as it was painful to hear. *"Yes, I just told her, 'Mom, Johnny has been trying to force his penis in me with a condom on.' I also told her that he had been putting his mouth on my vagina and making me suck his penis, etc. I described everything he was doing."* When I asked what her mother's response had been, Jennifer told me, *"She just said, 'You are a liar! We don't even use condoms,' etc."* Jennifer also confided with me that her mother still blames her for the break-up of her marriage to her stepfather.

When I asked Jennifer for an example of the abuses her stepfather had committed against other family members, she replied, *"He used to beat my brothers for anything, especially if they appeared to not be listening to him talk. He would choke my brothers as if he was wrestling, but honestly? He was serious. My mom has been kicked all in her stomach while she was pregnant. She has been punched in the face and all over her body."* Curiously, Jennifer stated that to her knowledge, none of her half-sisters, or step sisters, had been molested. She did, however, concede that her half-sister Monica had not had an easy time growing up. *"Monica was mistreated very badly. She would fight them back. At an early age she was put on Ritalin and they said she was ADHD so that they could get a check for her."*

Hoping she would tell me that the abuse involving her stepfather had been an isolated incident, I asked Jennifer if there were any other incidences of molestation in her life. To my great sorrow, she answered, *"Yes. Besides my stepdad, I was molested by my step-grandfather's brother, Freddy and my mom's step-brother Keith."* Jennifer also revealed that she had been forced to have sex against her will numerous times by various men with whom she had been involved.

I hesitantly asked Jennifer if it were possible for her to share with me the incidences involving Freddy and Keith. As always, Jennifer was able to see beyond her own pain and said she would. *"Once, when I was eleven, I was riding in a car with my Grandma, Grandpa and Freddy. I was in the backseat with Freddy and he put his hand under my skirt and fondled me in my panties. I couldn't scream because I was already traumatized by having something like that done to me before. I went into shock and nothing came out of my mouth. Then another time, while my mother was out gambling, Keith came over to get something from my Grandma. When I opened the door, he kissed me on my neck and pulled me down and tried to put his penis inside me, but he didn't succeed because I was a little girl; I was only twelve."*

At the age of thirteen, Jennifer reluctantly became her mother's look-out while she prostituted herself to men from the surrounding area. *"I would get paid fifty, or a hundred dollars to keep my mouth shut and to make sure nobody was coming."* When Jennifer complained to her mother that one of the men had groped her, her mother replied dismissingly, *"You made quick money, didn't you? Besides, he only touched your breast."* Following her mother's lead, it wasn't long before Jennifer decided she would give prostitution a try for herself.

I asked Jennifer what it had been like to be doing something so "adult" at such a young age. She answered. *"It didn't seem like a big deal really. I lost my virginity when I was thirteen to a man who was twenty-seven. I saw how easy it had been for my mother, so I started having sex frequently and with different men."* Because her mother was a private nurse, she was often out of the home. Taking advantage of when her parents were away, Jennifer would often have sex in their bedroom while her siblings slept in the room next door. *"I didn't know it then, but I know now that I was trying to fill the wounds and the void on the inside of me with sex."*

As if introducing her pre-pubescent child to prostitution wasn't enough, around the same time, Jennifer's mother was also introducing her daughter to witchcraft. *"My mother used to go to the graveyard and get dirt. She would put sulfur, graveyard dirt and red pepper together and burn candles with a Bible verse with people's names under it. She would also use witchcraft oils and powders."*

With everything she was telling me sounding so farfetched, I wondered if Jennifer really believed in the powers her mother claimed to possess. *"Oh yes, witchcraft can cause a person to be confused. It will cause a person to leave their husband or their wife or home. You can send people to jail, take people's belongings or make them sick. With witchcraft and Voodoo you have the power to do things to people and make it seem very real. Yes, witchcraft and Voodoo are real; just like Jesus Christ is real. The only difference is that witchcraft and Voodoo are the work of Satan, which is wicked."*

It was clear by Jennifer's response that she strongly believed in the things her mother claimed to be able to do. When I asked her why she felt her mother had resorted to using witchcraft, she replied, *"At first, she started to go to the witchcraft doctor for lottery numbers, for the dog track and jai lai, but then she learned that she could control people. Then she started casting spells on my stepdad and his family. Later on in life, she began to use it on her own children."*

The same summer as she was learning both witchcraft and how to sell her body, Jennifer, an African-American, went without her parents' permission to swim in a local river with her caucasian friend, Tina and her family. Jennifer knew that she was taking a great risk by going, but found the idea of escaping the hot Georgia sun too hard to turn down. For Jennifer, it wasn't the fact that she had gone without her parents' permission that she was most worried about. It was the fact that she had gone with a white family that weighed heaviest on her mind. *"My stepdad did not like white people."* Jennifer stated. And so, when her brother let it slip that she had gone to the river, Jennifer knew she would pay a heavy price for her afternoon of fun. *"They beat me with a window stick and a belt."* Jennifer said, *"Both my mom and stepdad took turns beating me. My mom was already angry at me because by this time I had already told her that my stepdad had been molesting me for as long as he had."*

After enduring the beating as long as she could, Jennifer ran out of the house and sought refuge in the home of her friend, Tina. *"I told Tina everything and her mother took me to the police station. I told the detectives and other investigators everything about the molestation and they saw bruises all over me. They sent me to foster care and I lived there for ninety days, then I was placed back into my mother's home and the abuse started all over again."*

Astonished that she would be sent back into the abuse, I asked Jennifer if she could explain how something like that could happen. It seems that during her time in the foster care

system, there had been one case worker in particular that stood out as being inordinately cruel to Jennifer. When I asked her to elaborate, Jennifer said, *"She would tell me I had mental problems and that I should stop lying to people about what had happened to me."* Evidentially, it had been her idea to place Jennifer back in her mother's home and back into the epicenter of the abuse. Neither of the women could know then, but they were destined to meet again, and the next time the stakes would be even higher.

Fortunately for Jennifer, word had gotten to her father about her situation and he was determined that if the child protection services wouldn't do anything about the abuse, he was going to. *"That's when my dad went through the courts and got custody of me and I went to live with him in New Jersey."* When I asked Jennifer if her mother had raised any objections to her going to live with her father, she answered dejectedly, *"No, she didn't object to it or even try to fight it."*

When I asked Jennifer to describe the reception she received when she arrived in New Jersey, she responded, *"My father was very loving and devoted to me. I was well accepted, but in the household, it was mainly just my dad that liked me. I did not always like the way my stepmother treated my father. She was always very controlling and assuming when it came to my daddy."*

When Jennifer was fourteen, she met a young man named Deon and began her first relationship since arriving in New Jersey. *"I started having sex with him secretly. After I met Deon, my dress code was beginning to change. I was wearing more revealing clothes and everything, but still nobody said anything to me about it. I think it was because I was always very respectful towards my parents and I was getting good grades, so they never suspected that I was leading a secret life."*

Not long after Jennifer started seeing Deon, her parents bought a Habitat for Humanity house in Pemberton, New Jersey and the family moved away. *"When we moved, I met boyfriend number two, Jizz. He was a big time drug dealer and we started having sex as well."* Jennifer also confessed that Jizz was in his early forties at the time, a fact that neither of them seemed to mind.

Wanting to be as honest with me as she could be, Jennifer also revealed that throughout her life she has struggled with addictions to various over the counter medications. *"As a teenager, 'til I was an adult, I was suicidal and overdosed on pills many times. When I was thirteen, I took an entire bottle of Bayer Aspirin."* When I asked her what had triggered the attempted suicide, Jennifer responded, *"I was miserable living with my mom and stepdad and nobody was listening to me. All they did was laugh and pick at me saying I was slow in my mindset and a liar. The ambulance came and took me to the hospital where they pumped my stomach. My parents' reaction was that I was crazy. I was also addicted to pain medicine, cough medicine, basically anything that would make me sleep to do away with the pain I had on the inside. Plus, I was insecure about a lot of things, especially of my weight."*

Like many of the women I was working with, as soon as she was old enough, Jennifer got a job working at McDonald's. She also joined the Army Junior ROTC program at her school. In addition, Jennifer's stepmother, a member of the military herself, would often arrange for Jennifer to babysit for a Sgt. First Class named Dennis who lived on base at Fort Dix. Jennifer

explained that along with her father, Dennis was one of the only positive male role models she's ever had in her life.

From all outward appearances, Jennifer was making great progress with her new life in New Jersey. However, behind the innocent sixteen year old façade, Jennifer continued to use sex and drugs to fill the empty spaces in her heart. *"I had three boyfriends I was having sex with and other men at Fort Dix. I was having one night stands frequently. Nobody knew about each other."*

Knowing that we all do things when we're younger that we often regret, I asked Jennifer to tell me how she felt now about having had so many partners at such a young age. *"I feel that it's not worth the drama. I was trying to fill an empty void. I was hurting and hurt people, hurt others. I look back on the foolish choices I made and I can't believe all the things I did. I have definitely used those poor decisions to learn to make better choices now."*

It was during the course of her babysitting duties that she met a man named Roosevelt. A mixture of Japanese, African American and Caucasian, Roosevelt was an attractive man nearly twenty years Jennifer's senior. *"He was married, but said he was in the process of getting a divorce. Because of this, I wasn't supposed to tell anybody we were having sex."* It wasn't long, however, before Roosevelt revealed his true self to Jennifer and slapped her one day while the two were arguing.

Bewildered and hurt, Jennifer confided in Dennis the things that Roosevelt had done. Dennis' recommendation to Jennifer was that she should never see Roosevelt again. Accepting now that she was every bit the impetuous teen, Jennifer admits that she would have been a lot better off had she heeded Dennis' advice. *"One day Roosevelt came to pick me up and my parents weren't home. I had skipped school to be with him. On the way back to my house, Roosevelt and I were arguing because he had found out that I had talked to Dennis about what he'd done. He purposely ran into another car on my side trying to hurt me. And because he was military police, he told the other people not to file a report and he paid them in cash."* Fortunately for Jennifer the only thing seriously injured in the accident was her pride. *"I couldn't believe that he would do such a foolish thing to me and I couldn't believe I'd have ever allowed myself to get into that kind of a situation."*

Confused as to how things had gone from being great, to a point where Roosevelt was physically assaulting Jennifer, I asked her to explain. *"Roosevelt knew if his wife found out about us, even though she lived in New York, she could have done some real damage to him in the courts. He was mad at me because I had told Dennis that he had slapped me. Dennis was also from New York and so he thought he was going to tell his wife."* A short time later, Jennifer ended her relationship with Roosevelt for good.

Eventually, as you would expect, Jennifer's secret life began to catch up with her. Her grades that had once been all A's and B's, were now dropping down to F's. *"I would change the F's to B's before my parents saw them."*

At seventeen, Jennifer started going to house parties and clubs with her cousin. It was around this time that providence would once again play a heavy hand in Jennifer's life and change things forever. While trying to call Fort Dix to speak with one of her male friends, Jennifer accidentally dialed the wrong number and ended up talking with a much older man,

named Tommy. *"After we'd been talking for a while, he asked me if I'd like to go to the movies sometime, and I said yes."* Soon after their first date, Jennifer began sneaking out of her house to meet Tommy, as often as possible.

Claiming that Tommy had *"captured"* her heart, it wasn't long before Jennifer had dumped all of her other men to be with him exclusively. Taking full advantage of the frequent New Jersey snow storms, Jennifer said that she would often tell her parents that she was stuck staying at a friend's house to ride out the storm. *"My dad was a truck driver and would sometimes be trapped in another state by the snow and my stepmother would be stuck at home. So I would tell them both that I was at a friend's house and then I'd stay in the barracks with Tommy."*

Stealing nights alone with Tommy as often as possible Jennifer didn't know it, but her luck was about to run out. *"I started to have a fever and was sick early in the morning. So my dad took me to the military doctor. They came out and said, 'She's pregnant.' But they also secretly told me that I had gonorrhea. My dad was interrogating me wanting to know who the father was. I finally confessed and told him he was a military soldier. I called Tommy and told him everything. He said it wasn't his baby and he wanted to break up with me."* Like anyone in her situation would, Jennifer found Tommy's rebuking to be extremely hurtful. *"I cried when Tommy denied our child because he was the only one I was having sex with at the time."*

Eventually, after quite a bit of coercing on Jennifer's part, Tommy finally agreed to meet her parents. I asked Jennifer to describe for me how the meeting had gone. *"My parents were already furious that I was pregnant at the age of eighteen, but when they found out he was a soldier and twenty-nine years old, they were even madder, especially the part about him being twenty-nine. They said we should marry for the sake of the child."* When I asked how Tommy had reacted to meeting her parents, Jennifer responded, *"Tommy was somewhat afraid of what all was going on to happen."*

Afterwards, Jennifer and Tommy were allowed to see each other and life for the couple began to settle into somewhat of a routine. That is, until the day Jennifer was visiting Tommy at his barracks and another woman called. Tommy had tried to explain it away by saying the caller was someone from his work, but Jennifer wasn't buying it. I asked Jennifer what there had been about the phone call that had led her to believe that Tommy wasn't telling her the truth. She replied, *"When I answered the phone the woman on it tried to sound all sexy saying, 'Can I speak to my baby?'"*

Jennifer, recognizing that she was being played, knew it was time to get out. *"When I told him I was going to leave him, Tommy started talking about marriage and there was no way I was going to get married. I was too young and not ready, so I told my dad I wanted to go back to Georgia. Besides that, I kept dreaming that my great granny was dying. We were very closely bonded together. The next thing I knew, I'd caught the first Greyhound smoking to get away from Tommy and to get back home to my Great Granny Ada."* Jennifer's intuition about her great grandmother had been right. She arrived in Georgia just two weeks prior to her great grandmother's passing and considers the fact that she was able to see her again a blessing.

When I asked Jennifer to explain what had become of her relationship with Tommy once she moved back to Georgia, she replied, *"When I got to Georgia, I called Tommy. Repeatedly he*

told me 'I am not taking care of our baby unless you marry me.' He said he'd send me a bus ticket if I'd please come back, but I was just wasn't interested. I kept in touch with him for a while, but then I stopped." Jennifer told me later on that Tommy has never had any contact with his child and doubts if her daughter will ever get to know her father.

After she arrived in Georgia, Jennifer moved back in with her mother and stepfather and soon found the ghosts of her past returning once more to haunt her. "I was pregnant and I'd be asleep and I would feel somebody standing over me. I would barely open my eyes and see my stepfather reach down getting ready to touch me, but he never did. Whenever he'd get close, I would move around in the bed with my eyes closed. He would get scared and come back later. Every time he would come into my room I would do the same thing over and over again."

I asked Jennifer what she thought she would have done if her stepfather had gathered enough nerve to touch her again. "I had plotted in my mind that if he touched me, it was the end. One night, I had a pocket knife under my blanket. I was going to stab him if he had touched me. He must have sensed it, because he left me alone." I would like to say that Jennifer's plan to protect herself came as a surprise me, but unfortunately I know all too well what she was feeling. Now, to be clear, I am not suggesting that violence is the answer. I am only saying that having been in a situation similar to Jennifer's, I can understand the level of desperation she was feeling and her overwhelming desire to protect herself at any cost.

Within a few short months of moving back to Georgia, Jennifer found herself needing to grow up fast. "I had my beautiful daughter Zaqayveyia, on September 5th, 1993 on Labor Day. I was so happy. My only concern was that I wanted to make sure that I was a better mother for her than my mother had been to me. Her birth announcement was in the newspaper. Immediately after, I got me a one bedroom apartment through the Housing Authority in King West. I was more to myself, seeing to my child. They put me on the Peach Program. I got paid to go to G.E.D school and it paid for my child day care. Two months of being faithful with that and I quit."

The Peach Program, in Georgia, is a state run public assistance program for low income families with children. When asked why she dropped out of the program, Jennifer said, "I started to hang around this girl named Jackie and I just didn't want to go anymore. What makes quitting so bad is that these people were paying me \$4.50 an hour just to go to G.E.D school." I could tell by the tone of Jennifer's writing that she still regrets her decision to drop out of the program.

Soon after she started hanging out with Jackie, Jennifer met Wendell, the man who would become the father of her second child. "I moved into a two bedroom apartment in the same complex as Jackie. Almost immediately Wendell began to stay with me." And almost immediately, the problems began. "He would leave for days and wouldn't come home. He would spread all kinds of nasty rumors about me to my friend Jackie and his brother. It really hurt, the things he was saying."

Evidentially, speaking ill of Jennifer to her friends was not the only thing that Wendell would be guilty of. "Come to find out, he was on parole for stealing. Not only that, he was still stealing from people. If he worked, he spent his money on everything except for our bills. So we were constantly arguing." Things went from bad to worse when Wendell and Jennifer's arguments turned to violence. "One day, while I was pregnant, Wendell tried to choke me out.

Then I found out he was cheating. I also found out that he got another girl pregnant while I was pregnant."

After the physical abuse started, Jennifer asked Wendell to move out of her apartment, but says their relationship continued to be on again, off again. *"He would break into my apartment and force me to have sex with him. I began to wonder why was I so crazy about this man after all he had done to me. I said something wasn't right. True enough, I found out Wendell had put witchcraft on me to make sure I didn't leave him."*

Again, knowing nothing about witchcraft, I asked Jennifer to please explain how she came to find out that Wendell had used witchcraft on her. *"I knew because I found a jar in my backyard sticking upside down with my picture in it. When Wendell came home, I told him 'I know why I can't leave you, because you put witchcraft on me.' He said, 'I don't believe in nothing like that.' That's when I told him I didn't want anything else to do with him."*

After Jennifer confronted Wendell about the witchcraft, she claims he began to change back into his once charming self. *"I hadn't had my second baby yet and I had my daughter. All I wanted was for my family to work. Wendell said he wanted me and my daughter to go meet some of his family that we hadn't met yet. We went to visit his family and then we went to a trailer that Wendell said he'd bought for me and my daughter. We laid up there for a day or two and then he said he had to go to work and that he'd see me that evening, but he never came back. My daughter and I were left in that trailer for four days without food. The insects and rats was real bad, too. The next door neighbors helped us by calling our family and giving us food. But they could have been killers or anything. So after we got back home I told Wendell not to come near me or my daughter again."*

Within days of being rescued from the trailer, Jennifer went into labor with her second child. *"I had my baby boy Raukeese Travaze Johnson on April 14th, 1995. At least that's what I thought I was naming him 'til Wendell walked in and said, 'This is my son and Wendell Jr. is going to be his name.' I said fine, but I will not have anything to do with you."* After Jennifer returned home from the hospital, Wendell would use the baby as an excuse to see her. Finally, Jennifer resorted to going over to her friend Jackie's house so that Wendell could visit with the baby, but she wouldn't have to be alone with him.

After that, Jennifer claims that Wendell kept stalking her to the point where, in desperation, she once again moved back in with her mother, but even that relief didn't last very long. *"My mother, all she wanted was my children's money, but I told her it was for my kids. So my stepdad told her to put me and my children out of their house. Mind you, I'd let my apartment go because of Wendell stalking me. So, me and my children was homeless for a while. I've stayed with all kinds of people who was only interested in my children's food stamps and checks."*

Eventually, Jennifer and her children would once again find a place to call their own. But by her own admission, Jennifer was not necessarily making the best choices for herself, or her children. *"I'd lost all hope and began to go clubbing and sleeping with all kinds of men. After Wendell Sr., my self-esteem was very low. Clubbing and sleeping with the men made me feel alive again. I had lost hope of ever being with a man that could love me honestly without mistreating me. I was letting people influence me through being a whore, hanging out at the clubs. I was drinking and I was smoking marijuana occasionally. Being a people pleaser and loving people*

who didn't even love themselves. I used to care about what my family members and friends would say. They would tell me that I wouldn't ever be nothing but a whore. That seed was planted in me at an early age, so whenever I'd start something, I didn't feel like I could finish because I was no good. So then I started doing men like they were doing me."

It was during this period of self-exploration and indulgence, that Jennifer met and began dating a man named Jimmy. *"I had been dating Jimmy, but I broke up with him because I had promised myself that I would never have a person who dealt drugs in my life and around my children. Jimmy couldn't face the fact that I didn't want him anymore. So he attacked me and raped me."* It was during this assault that Jennifer became pregnant with her third child. I asked Jennifer how she had felt after the attack. *"I felt nasty and violated. I got in the shower and repeatedly scrubbed myself and cried."* Jennifer says she now regrets not having gone to police to file charges against Jimmy.

Even though she was no longer drinking or doing any drugs because of her pregnancy, Jennifer still joined her friends while they were going out. *"One night while I was four and a half months pregnant, I was at the club and I met this guy named Chris who told me I should not be at the club. I told him to mind his own business with my smart mouth."* When Chris asked Jennifer out, she told him, *'I don't want to date anybody right now. I was trying to get myself together. I had no idea that Chris would pursue me.'*

It was around the same time as she met Chris, that Jennifer decided to start attending church. *"I couldn't change overnight, but I felt if I would hang in the church something would change in me. I wasn't meeting nobody there, I was only going there to hear the word of God. Nobody knew I went to church some Sundays. The church I was going to was in Iron City, Georgia and I met a lot of really nice people while I was going there."* Confused as to why Jennifer had tried to keep the fact that she was going to church a secret, I asked her to explain. *"I was trying to keep it a secret because a lot of people will judge you, especially your friends that are still out doing what they ought not to be doing."*

During this time, Jennifer's friend Cathy began dating a new guy who had a cousin the two thought would be perfect for Jennifer; that cousin, was Chris. *"Cathy had no idea that I had already met Chris at a club. Again, I told him I was going through enough. I was not interested, but my friends convinced me, so I started to talk to Chris. Chris never tried to have sex with me off the start like all of the other men did. Chris waited three whole months until I was ready. Daily, Chris would go out of his way for me and my children. I was pregnant with Jimmy's baby and thought about giving it up for adoption, but Chris said 'No, we gonna keep him.' Chris wanted to name the baby after him, but his mom said 'No baby, you might want to have a son one day and you will probably want to name him after you.' Jennifer agreed."*

On July 26th, 1996, Jennifer gave birth to her third child, Joshua. *"Chris came from his job to the hospital while I was in labor."* I asked Jennifer if Jimmy ever knew that he was the father, and if so, had he ever made any attempt to be in Joshua's life? *"Yes, he knew. Chris even tried to talk to him about Joshua, but Jimmy called me everything but a child of God and denied that Joshua was his."*

For all intents and purposes, life for the young couple was really working out, but it wasn't without its share of growing pains. Years of being abused and mistreated made it hard for

Jennifer to let her guard down with Chris. *"I was so happy in my relationship with Chris. He catered to us. He was a wonderful person to be around. I had a good man that loved me and my children. Sometimes I would just burst out crying in tears. I began to have nightmares of the past; the molestation and the rape, but Chris would hold me and let me sleep on his chest or in his arms. It's the only place I've ever felt safe"*

In addition to finally being involved with someone who was an encouraging influence in her life, Jennifer also found herself in the presence of a woman she could respect. *"From the very beginning, my mother-in-law loved me and my children unconditionally. This lady went out of her way for us. She even helped me to get my apartment back."*

But even with all of the positive things Chris was doing for Jennifer, she readily admits that there were times that she was not always at her best in the relationship. *"Chris was not physically abusive to me, but sometimes I was to him. Sometimes I would withhold sex from him. I was emotionally abusive towards him, and wouldn't trust him no matter how much he proved himself to me. I was happy physically, but on the inside of me, I still felt alone and abandoned."*

From my own experience, I thought I knew exactly what Jennifer was talking about. Sometimes the better someone treats you, the more you are reminded of your past pains and the more the fear kicks in. When chaos and being treated poorly is your norm, anything other than that, is frightening. You know how to handle being treated badly, what you don't know, is how to be treated with respect. You begin to doubt the person's sincerity and so you put up walls to protect yourself. Ultimately your thought process becomes *'It's better to make them leave you than to sit back and wait for them to leave.'* When I asked Jennifer if this had been her experience she said, *"Yes, that's exactly how I felt."* I thought so.

From the sounds of things, while Chris' mother was doing everything she could to help the young couple, his father was doing quite the opposite. *"Chris worked with his father and he would tell Chris that Jimmy would be over at our apartment while Chris was at work which was not true."*

I couldn't help but be confused by the drastic discrepancies between the two parents and so I asked Jennifer if she could explain what would cause her father-in-law to say such a thing. *"Chris' father is a crack addict and he didn't like me because I told Chris that we could not enable him if he was gonna be an addict."*

September 1996 found Jennifer and Chris living in their own apartment with their three children, three year old Zaqaiveyia, one year old Wendell, Jr. and one month old Joshua. For Jennifer, the morning of September 7th, had started off like any other day, but by its end, it would prove to be the beginning of a nightmare that lasts to this day. *"I walked to the post office that day to get my food stamps. I left my children with my Aunt Shirley who lived next door to me while I walked to the post office. Immediately, I came back and got my children and proceeded on with my day. That evening my fiancé Christopher came home from work. I asked him if he could keep our kids while I went to the Winn Dixie store. I went to the store, bought what I needed and came home and finished cooking. Next it was time to bathe the children and get them prepared for bed. I put the two oldest in the bathtub together while I had my one month old son Joshua in my lap to bathe him in the sink. When I took Joshua's socks off I noticed a bubble under each foot. I learned from my parenting class that when you don't understand something*

you take your child to the emergency room, so that's what I did. The physician on duty said he had ruptured bullous lesions (blisters) on his feet caused by being burned. I was hysterical and upset. I couldn't believe this happened to my child. The physician gave me some Neosporin and dressings and showed me how to keep it clean and I had an appointment for him to see the doctor on Monday. Joshua was released to me as the responsible adult."

Because all physicians are required to report suspicious, unexplained injuries to children, the hospital notified the Department of Family and Children Services. *"I went home and questioned my Aunt Shirley and Chris. The physician said that the burns are cigarette burns and both of them smoke and both of them had kept my children. I don't smoke."*

I asked Jennifer how her Aunt Shirley had reacted to being questioned about injuring Joshua. She replied, *"She got real hostile and loud. She said I was crazy and began spreading rumors that my fiancé Chris had burned the baby's feet and was abusing Joshua which was not true. I believe she had so much to say and pointed the finger at Chris because she did it herself."*

When I asked her how Chris had reacted to her questioning, Jennifer replied, *"He felt as if I still didn't trust him after all the time we'd been together. He was very hurt for me to think something like that."*

On September 10, 1996, the Department of Family and Children Services came to visit Jennifer at her home. *"A caseworker named Mrs. McLemore knocked on my door, but I didn't open the door because I had a past encounter with her."* As it turns out, Jennifer's description of "a past encounter" was a bit of an understatement. In truth, standing at the door was the very woman who thirteen years earlier, had sent Jennifer back to live with her abusive stepfather. The next day, the Department of Family and Children's Services sent out a different caseworker to talk to Jennifer. This time, Jennifer had no problem allowing the workers into her home. *"She took pictures and questioned me, but I couldn't tell her who had done it because I had left my son with two different people. There had not been any other kinds of abuse with my fiancé Chris, and I was still just getting to know my Aunt Shirley because she used to live in Florida and had just moved back to Georgia."*

While Jennifer was trying to unravel the mystery of who had injured her son and why, the Department of Family and Children's Services were questioning her Aunt Shirley who Jennifer insisted was lying. When I asked Jennifer why she thought her aunt would do such a thing she said, *"After this incident, we found out she was on crack. We stopped giving her money and food and wouldn't have anything to do with her. Chris and I began to think it was her who had burned Joshua's feet. We told the caseworker that we thought it was my aunt, but they wouldn't believe us. When Shirley found out that we weren't going to give her any more money she put the blame for burning Joshua on Chris."*

Unclear as to why Jennifer and Chris had been giving her aunt money, I asked her to explain. *"We were giving her money because I thought she sincerely needed the food or the money when she asked. She was a single parent and a family member, so I thought she was honestly struggling. But, come to find out, she was using us so she could supply her crack habit. We were upset to the fullest and didn't want to have anything else to do with her. We don't support people's drug habits. True enough, I was on welfare and got food stamps and I was not supposed to have anybody living in my apartment with me except for the ones on the lease, but who hasn't done that as a single parent in the projects?"*

Despite a thorough investigation, no-one has ever been charged with injuring Joshua's feet. Over the next several months the caseworker who visited with Jennifer and her children, found nothing else wrong and even complimented Jennifer on how well she took care of her

children. In an attempt to put what had happened behind them, Jennifer and Chris spent the next several months busily readying themselves and their children for the holidays.

However, on December 29th, 1996, just four days after celebrating their first Christmas as a family, Jennifer and Chris would face what she now describes as the most horrible day of her life. Knowing that it would be my most difficult question for her yet, I asked Jennifer to describe for me her account of what happened that day. She replied, *"By this time, my son Joshua was four months old. My brother Michael put him to bed around 11:30pm. My fiancé Chris and I were playing the Playstation II. Michael put Joshua to bed and then came back in and started playing video games with us. Around midnight I decided to go to bed because I had been sick all day with a headache. I'd had one wisdom tooth pulled and had another one that was bothering me. I had taken some pain medicine that the dentist had given me and a Tylenol PM, so I told Chris and Michael if they heard Joshua crying to change his diaper and feed him and I went to bed."*

Little did she know, but that would be the last night Jennifer would ever see her son Joshua alive. Knowing that it was going to be extremely difficult for her to relive, I cautiously asked Jennifer if she could take me back to the day Joshua died. *"I got up around 5am to use the bathroom and to check on Joshua. He was cold and not breathing. I yelled 'Somebody call 911! Something's wrong with my baby!' So Michael ran and called 911, while Chris consoled me. I couldn't understand what was wrong with my child again. I knew he'd had a cold and some irregular breathing, but nothing bad. When the paramedics arrived, they searched for a pulse. They asked me to tell them about everything that had happened. I told them that I found him in his crib not breathing. I was so out of it, meaning I was crying. There was no bruises on his body so they pronounced him deceased of SIDS. The ambulance driver stated there was no reason to go to the hospital, that Joshua was deceased. I tried to go with my baby, but they wouldn't let me. They could of did anything to my baby when he left me. I wasn't there to know what happened when they got to the hospital."*

Devastated, Jennifer struggled to make sense of what was happening around her. *"I had never been in trouble with the law and I was young and naïve to life."* A few days later, Jennifer and Chris held a private funeral for their son. *"Chris and family members were there. My other children were young and I really don't think they understood what was going on."*

On January 4th, 1997, the autopsy results came back indicating that Joshua had not died from SIDS, as had been previously suggested, but had actually died from something much more severe. *"When the autopsy came back, they said he died of child abuse and blunt force trauma to the abdomen. I was like, 'How can this have happened?' As I began to listen to everybody's stories such as the autopsy doctor and detectives, everything was far from what happened. All of the dates and times were off. If Joshua cried that night, I didn't hear it. All three kids slept in the room next to my room. The reason I had Joshua's crib in the room with the other kids is because I have breathing problems and I sleep with the air conditioner on even in the winter."*

Within days of learning about the autopsy results, Jennifer also realized that her Aunt Shirley had once again been cooperating with the investigators. *"Shirley had deceived the State into thinking that Chris and I had been fighting the night Joshua died. Yes, we had had a disagreement, but it was nowhere near a fight. She was also telling the next door neighbors what to say against us. She was like a bully in our neighborhood."*

Less than six weeks after the autopsy reports came in, Jennifer and Chris, as well as, Jennifer's brother, Michael, were arrested and charged with felony murder and cruelty to

children. *"On February 11th, 1997, me and my husband got a call at my mother-in-law's house to go to the Donalsonville Sheriff's Department. When we got there, they put the cuffs on our hands as they read us our rights. As we was being arrested, they was arresting my brother Michael in Bainbridge."*

I asked Jennifer if she could give me an idea of what was going through her mind after she had been arrested. She responded, *"After I was arrested, I felt this is a bunch of bullshit. I was pissed off and was grieving over my child's death. Plus, while we were in jail, my children was in foster care and was being mistreated by their foster parents and the welfare supervisor. They were telling my children their parents and uncle would never see daylight. That we was gonna rot in prison. Our children were devastated and still are."*

I asked Jennifer if after her arrest, if she ever thought that she would be convicted, or did she think that something would happen that would lead to her release. She responded, *"I didn't think those bogus charges would fly because there was so much conflicting evidence. But the officials had made up their minds of a conviction before we were even tried. I knew I had a long fight ahead of me that I couldn't fight alone because I was weak from my child's death."*

A few months later, on April 25th, 1997, Jennifer and Chris were married in their hometown church. Surprised that they would get married in the midst of the investigation into their child's death, I asked Jennifer if the wedding had already been planned for that date, or if it had been something they had planned after Joshua's passing. *"Chris and I began dating on November 18th, 1995. We had been engaged since February 1996. Before Joshua died, we had decided to have a Valentine's Day wedding on February 14th, 1997 and was planning on moving out of the section eight apartment we were living in. The wedding we ended up having was nothing like the one we had planned, because after we were arrested, all of our money we'd saved went to paying our bail."*

As for why they married when they did, Jennifer had this to say, *"We went ahead and got married when we did because both Chris and I came from very religious backgrounds and his grandma stayed on us that fornication was a sin. She was right, so we tied the knot because of that. We didn't want to live in sin any longer. The State's theory was that we got married because we wouldn't have to testify against each other, but that was false. We had no knowledge of the law or how it operated because I didn't get into no trouble."*

Their time as newlyweds was short lived, however, because less than three months after having been released on bail for the charges involving Joshua, Jennifer was surprised to learn that Chris had once again been arrested. *"My husband went to trial from the Colquitt, Miller County Jail, because he got a robbery charge."* I asked Jennifer to tell me how she felt about Chris being arrested from robbery while he was out on bail. She responded, *"I was devastated and broken. I felt like he didn't give a damn about me, nor his child because he wouldn't allow himself to be put in that situation if he loved us as much as he said he did."* Surprised, I asked Jennifer if she knew what exactly Chris had been arrested for. She responded, *"He and two other friends followed an older couple home. Chris snatched the lady's pocketbook which caused her to lose her balance and she fell and broke her arm. These people were really old."*

After having worked with Jennifer for almost a year, I received a letter from her indicating something that really shocked me. In it she explained that in February 1997, just prior to being arrested, she had begun to notice that she wasn't feeling well in the mornings.

Suspicious that something might be amiss, she decided to do a pregnancy test just to be sure. *"I was pregnant and immediately we went to the doctor."* I asked her how she felt about finding out she was pregnant at such a tenuous time. She answered, *"I was cool with it, but couldn't even enjoy my child because of the foolishness I was going through with the case."*

All three defendants went to trial on August 17th, 1997. I asked Jennifer to try to describe for me what her experience of going to court had been like. *"To be in front of a court who is presenting things that I knew wasn't true and not one of us had no-one fighting our case was terrifying. Our lawyers just let the courts have their way with us. I felt like someone had took a knife out and stabbed me in the heart as I sat there and listened to the lies."*

As each attorney took their turn presenting their cases, Jennifer sat quietly with thoughts racing through her mind. *"All I kept thinking was about my deceased child and what really happened. I had incriminated myself because they were saying that they were going to take my other children if I didn't. I just blacked out and started saying anything. I wondered who was going to see about my other children if they found me guilty with these bogus charges. I was devastated that all of us were rounded up like a bunch of pigs to be slaughtered. I felt worthless, heartbroken, shocked and alone. When the verdict was read, I went to screaming and crying uncontrollably. I was thinking about my unborn child as well."*

Convinced that the fate of her and her husband were sealed before they ever entered into the courtroom, Jennifer remains highly critical of both her representation, as well as the court system in general. *"My husband and I were already judged harshly by the judicial system and our family before we ever were tried in court. My husband wore a jersey and baggy pants so he was judged to be a drug dealer, but he had a job. I was portrayed as a woman of abuse that would allow my husband to mistreat my deceased son. I went along with it under coercion. My attorney went along with the State because they had already judged and preconceived in their minds what they think actually happened. All of this was going on and I knew what they were telling my kids and how they were being treated."*

On August 17th, 1997, Jennifer was sentenced to life in prison for the murder of her son, Joshua. I asked Jennifer if she could possibly explain for me what she was feeling when she heard that the jury had found her guilty. *"All I could think of is what was going to happen to my children?"* Fortunately for Jennifer, her mother-in-law would take custody of all three of Jennifer's remaining children.

Immediately upon their conviction, an appeal was filed on behalf of all three defendants. For Jennifer, the appeal would buy her some much needed precious time. *"I was very lucky that my baby was not born in prison or jail. By me having an appeal, I was eligible for another bond. I made it, so I stayed out on bond until my baby was ten months old. My appeal was denied in July 1998. On August 13, 1998, I was put back into jail and headed off to prison."* Chris' conviction was also denied and he, too, was sent to prison.

In September 1998, Jennifer's brother Michael's conviction was overturned when it was determined that even though he was in the house the night Joshua died, there was not enough evidence that he was involved in his death.

Having been in prison now for more than thirteen years, Jennifer shared with me that she has had a lot of time to think about her life and to come to terms with a lot of things that has happened to her in her past. *"I have overcome the nightmares of being molested and raped. Being abused both physically and mentally; myself being abusive to men physically and mentally. They said I wouldn't ever be nothing, but on July 15, 2010, I graduated with a GED with honors."*

When I asked Jennifer what she most wanted the readers of her story to know, she wistfully responded, *"The public needs to know that sometimes people can get caught up in the penal system and it doesn't necessarily mean they are guilty."*

It took Jennifer and I well over a year to complete her story and through it all she continued to declare that she had knew nothing about what happened to her son. Just as we were beginning to wrap up our work together, ~~she contacted me to let me know that she was in the process of filing for divorce from her husband Chris. In her words, "He keeps up a lot of unnecessary drama along with his family."~~ ~~ad lib?~~ *section*

Jennifer was also recently denied parole, but continues to fight to find someone to re-open her case and help her get to the truth of what really happened to her son.

page 15
5

15