

my story

An Empathy Project By
Barbara Basketfield

I am 42 years old. My mother was an alcoholic. I don't know who my father is. I was raised by whichever grandmother or aunt that would care for me. English is not my first language. I did not begin to learn English until I went to school. It was hard. I did not understand what they were saying. I still cannot read or write hardly at all. I get by with the help of others.

My aunts taught me housekeeping skills; sewing, crafts, cooking and cleaning. "If you don't learn these things, your in-laws will talk about you," they said. I stopped going to school in tenth grade when I had the first of five children. Their father is an alcoholic, and is homeless and now lives on the street. After my fifth child, I got my tubes tied and got divorced.

I try to get high everyday. I don't like to drink, but do sometimes. I mostly use pot. Sometimes I've sold it to friends, so I get to keep some for myself.

I enjoy the company of men. I like to flirt. It makes me feel good to be wanted. I found a man with a job, a car and a house. About twelve years ago I moved in with him and left my children. His family had thought my children had gone to live with relatives, but they didn't. The older boys had to look after the younger ones. My youngest was about three when this happened.

When my ex-husband's mother found out the children were alone, she moved all the kids in with her and her daughter. I lost custody. I don't know why she did that. When she passed away last year, the kids wrote in her eulogy, "She was the only mother we ever knew." I don't know why they said that. They know who their mother is. I still don't get along with the kids' aunt. I don't why.

I married that man several years ago. He drinks a lot and I don't like it. I try to do a "wake-up" joint every day and go from there. I wish he would stop drinking. Why can't he just do drugs, like me?

My husband lost his job because of a DUI. We were partying one night. I wanted to go out, but he didn't. I kept after him until we went. He totaled the car. He got another job and a car for a while, but I didn't like it. He had to work 6 days a week and I was home alone all the time without the car. He got hurt on the job and was off a while. We lost that car, too, so he had to quit because he couldn't get a ride every day. He got a temporary office job one winter. That was good, because his cousin could give us a ride everyday and I could go and wait with him all day. But that job ended.

For a long time now, we haven't worked. We can't get a job because we need a car to go to work. No one will come to our house and drive us everyday when we need to be picked up. Satellite TV is turned off, so there is nothing to do but get high or get drunk. And, to get a job, neither one of us could pass a drug test, anyway.

We get a government grant check and food stamps to survive. We can't keep up with the bills and have to ask our families for help. We make up stories to tell them about how we have no heat or food or lights and if they give us money, we buy some pot and a couple of 30-packs. The jokes on them.

His family doesn't like me. They say terrible things about me. They want him to leave me. So what, if I've cheated on him. He drinks so much, that's the reason we have no money. We argue a lot. Sometimes, I leave and go live with my kids and their aunt. She doesn't like me, but I am the kids' mother. (I'm really proud of my oldest girl. She has a baby now so she gets her own check and food stamps. She can support herself.)

While I'm away from my husband, I see other men, get them to give me drugs and money. Sometimes my husband's family steps in, sobers him up, gets our heat and lights turned back on. They

tell him not to take me back. So when it gets close to the time the next grant check comes, I call him, promise him everything will be different and so far, he always takes me back. I really don't have anywhere else to go.

My husband has a couple of really rich relatives. One aunt has a house and a car all by herself. She has two jobs. Another aunt and uncle both have really good jobs. They have a four bedroom house and two cars. All they care about is money. They have so much. We have none. They should give us a lot more than they do. We don't have anything. We deserve nice things, too. They are always going on trips. We should be able to do that, too. They should just pay for us to go with them.

No one will give us cash anymore. They might bring us food or give us a ride. But no cash. I guess they figured out what we really do with the money. Some people believe the stories we make up, but if they don't, we sell something or sometimes steal things to sell to buy beer and drugs.

Last time I saw my husband's aunt, I asked for money eight different ways. She gave me nothing. I guess I'll have to make up a better story or find someone who doesn't know us.

Wait now, someone's just brought me some pot. I'm going to get high.

From the author:

Writing this story was a painful process. The story is told from the point of view of someone with whom I have had problems for years. Completing the project gave me a sense of peace. Now I understand the source of my conflict with this person and, also, realize the futility of wishing things were different.

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