

Swaddled in an orange jumpsuit

She gave birth to a son in the back of a squad car.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [December 21, 2016](#) issue



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The public elementary school across the street from our church is the poorest in the city. Chronic absences among students are common given uneven home lives, regular sickness, and parents wrestling with poverty.

Dana is the woman on our church staff whose entire job is focused on that school. She runs programs that benefit school families, one of which is a food pantry offering everything from social worker services to free haircuts. Dana met a woman shopping there named Aleesha.

Aleesha is a petite 25-year-old with a child in kindergarten. As she was carefully perusing the food shelves to select certain items, Dana learned that Aleesha had taken the bus from a hospital 20 minutes away. She wasn't looking to bring back anything more than was convenient to carry.

"What was she doing in *that* hospital anyway," I asked Dana, "if her oldest kid goes to this school and we have a hospital just ten blocks away?"

It turns out that six days earlier, Aleesha was driving to visit her sick brother in a town across the Mississippi River. Driving on a suspended license (from having no insurance) was a big mistake, which she now regrets. When a police officer pulled her over for a routine traffic stop, he arrested her, impounded her van, and took her to jail. She tried to convince her jailers that she was pregnant and now enduring labor pains. But no one believed her. A corrections officer finally put her in a squad car that headed for the hospital. On the way, Aleesha pulled down her orange jumpsuit to give birth to a baby boy in the back seat.

When Aleesha showed up at the food pantry, her six-day-old preemie was back in the neonatal unit. Her husband, who had walked two and a half hours with their three kids to join her at the hospital, was living temporarily in a room there, thanks to the kindness of a hospital administrator.

Upon leaving the food pantry, Aleesha had two requests. First, would Dana, who offered to drive her back to the hospital, be willing to stop at the payday loan office so she could cash a check. Second, would Dana be willing to stop at the Family Dollar store so she could purchase some undergarments. Both were easy requests to honor, though the pain of observing the absurd fees of the check-cashing endeavor was difficult. And buying underwear at a Dollar store is hard to do with dignity.

Aleesha chattered in the car. Dana listened, as she does so well. Aleesha poured out her anguish. She told of contemplating adoption for her newborn, but then changing her mind. "I just couldn't do it. Kids always want to locate their biological parents. What would I say to him if he came back to me someday and asked why I didn't love him as much as his sisters and brother?"

The sadness of children of poverty giving birth to other children of poverty is profound. Easy solutions do not exist. But when my ears hear the Christmas story this year, my heart is going straight to that swaddling cloth of an orange jumpsuit, and that manger as cold as the backseat of a squad car.

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