

She's His Rock. His Parole Officer Won't Let Him See Her.

As prison rolls drop and the number of parolees increases, a Connecticut man learns that getting out of prison is not the same as being free.

By Shaila Dewan

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HARTFORD, Conn. — During Erroll Brantley Jr.'s nearly two years in prison, his girlfriend, Katherine Eaton, visited him three times a week, the maximum allowed. She wrote him letters and spent hundreds of dollars on phone calls, during which the couple spoke of their longing to be back together in her three-bedroom house with the picture window. Amid the I love yous and I miss yous, she promised to help him stay off heroin and readjust to life outside.

But when Mr. Brantley was released on parole, he got some bad news: He would not be allowed to live with his beloved Katherine. Or see her. Or even call her.

At first, Mr. Brantley, a chef by trade, shrugged off the no-contact rule. His first day out, he went to Ms. Eaton's house, where she had stocked the fridge with shallots and jalapeños. The couple went hiking in the woods and shopping at Marshalls. They cooked Thanksgiving dinner.

"She's my best friend. She's my support system," Mr. Brantley said. "She's my rock."

But when Mr. Brantley walked into the parole office with Ms. Eaton, he went a step too far. His parole officer, Mark Pawlich, strapped an ankle monitor on him and sent him to a halfway house. "The state," Mr. Brantley protested, "has broken us up."

The state can do that.

Parolees may not live behind bars, but they are far from free. Their parole officers have enormous power to dictate whom they can see, where they can go, and whether they are allowed to do perfectly legal things like have a beer. Breaking those rules can land a parolee back in jail — the decision is up to the parole officer.

In some ways, Mr. Brantley was fortunate. He faced a system far less punitive than it might have been a few years earlier, thanks to Connecticut's efforts to give parolees more chances to succeed. When Mr. Brantley failed a drug test, he wasn't sent back to prison. Instead, he was ordered into treatment.

But addiction is only one of the many challenges faced by those getting out. As prison populations drop, the number of parolees is increasing — people with layer upon layer of disadvantages that often date back to early childhood. For more than a year, “Frontline” and The New York Times followed newly released prisoners as they tried to find homes and jobs, reconnect with loved ones and avoid temptation, sometimes discovering that the system created to help them can also hold them back.

One of them could not buy his daughter the Christmas present she wanted because the halfway house controlled his spending; another, living in her own apartment, was told her boyfriend could not spend the night. For their part, parole officers were making difficult calls about the best interests of their charges, while navigating safety rules such as the one that affected Mr. Brantley: no contact between parolees and their past victims.

Even in Connecticut, which has come to be seen as a model, parolees face obstacles that can seem blind to individual circumstances — Mr. Brantley, for example, could be forbidden to see Ms. Eaton until May 2019. Still, a parolee's misstep can make the most unforgiving restrictions suddenly seem justified.

To Officer Pawlich, seeing Mr. Brantley and Ms. Eaton embrace in the parole office lobby was a final straw that pushed him from tough love to fury. Mr. Brantley had already racked up several violations.

“He’s giving me every reason to lock him up, and I’m still working with him,” he said, using salty language. “I’ve got 65 cases and one flaming” jerk.

A Troubling Attitude

Something about Erroll Brantley rubs parole officers the wrong way.

Though they acknowledge that he’s a smart guy, dropping words like “cocksurety” and “self-stigmatized” — they are less impressed when he exhibits the vestiges of a youth spent playing in rock bands and partying. Now 44, he still projects a nonchalance that can raise official hackles.

At their first meeting, Officer Pawlich asked if he had any concerns.

“None at all,” Mr. Brantley said.

Mr. Pawlich retorted, “That’s a concern.”

After just a few weeks, Mr. Brantley went on a heroin bender and checked himself into rehab.



Erroll Brantley Jr. has struggled with heroin addiction. He has also struggled with the conditions of parole.

Christopher Capozziello for The New York Times

Mr. Brantley’s soliloquies can vamp from lyrical shrewdness — “I want to know what is so empty in myself that I have to fill it with everything but love” — to blaming external factors for his problems, sometimes with good reason.

The halfway house, he complained, pointing out needles littering the ground, was mere blocks from a park where he used to score drugs.

Many of his mental health issues, he said, stem from a family tragedy when he was 13: His aunt, her son and her boyfriend were murdered by the aunt’s ex-boyfriend.

Not long after, Mr. Brantley began using drugs.

Mr. Brantley's and Ms. Eaton's current problems had their roots in his addiction. He and Ms. Eaton met in 2012. She eventually took him in as a housemate, then a romance developed. In early 2014, he relapsed. Needing money for a fix, he took the television and, using her car, pawned it.

When he returned to the house, three bags of heroin in his pocket, officers were waiting. Ms. Eaton, unable to persuade Mr. Brantley to seek help and knowing that the heroin could be laced with a dangerous drug called fentanyl, had called the police. "He was going to end up getting in really big trouble or he was going to die," she said.

Defining 'Victim'

Parolees are routinely forbidden to have any contact with past victims, out of both a regard for the victims' rights and concern for their safety.

Initially, the Department of Correction did not deem Ms. Eaton a victim. Charges that Mr. Brantley stole her TV and car were dropped. (He was ultimately convicted for an unrelated break-in at an auto shop.) Though victims are not allowed to visit prisoners, she was. The parole board even told Mr. Brantley that Ms. Eaton would not be listed as a victim. But as Mr. Brantley was preparing to move home, someone noticed that she'd called the police that day in 2014, and rejected the plan.

The police report said Ms. Eaton was uninjured and there were no signs of physical violence. But, the officer wrote, "she is still fearful of him because of his anger," a phrase that would later be cited in the parole department's decision to keep them apart.

Ms. Eaton, 34, is adamant that she was never Mr. Brantley's victim or was, at least in one sense only: "Everybody in Erroll's life has been a victim, if that's the broad term that they want to use," she said. "Anybody who loves him or cares about him or has wanted to see him do better has been a victim to his addiction."



Katherine Eaton does not use heroin, but her life has been touched by it. Her boyfriend, Errol Brantley, has an addiction that has repeatedly landed him in jail. Christopher Capozziello for The New York Times

In the couple's view, Ms. Eaton was the best person Mr. Brantley could have in his life: She does not use drugs. She has a steady job as a medical assistant. She has never missed a mortgage payment. The portion of Mr. Brantley's wages that went to the halfway house could have gone toward the couple's future.

Though Mr. Brantley chafed at requirements that he account for every hour, he did well at the halfway house. He stayed clean and found a job. The no-contact rule was lifted, and parole officials agreed to review Mr. Brantley's request to live with Ms. Eaton.

A parole officer, Jeffrey Simmons, drove to Ms. Eaton's home for an inspection and interview. Things did not go well. Her assertion that she had not been a victim was, to Officer Simmons, evidence that she was hiding something. "As she told the story, she left out pieces of the story," he said afterward.

He was equally skeptical of the idea that anyone could choose to love an addict. “I’m sure he tells her that, ‘Hey, I want to get back on track, I’m on the methadone program now, I’m finally fixing my life,’ which, you know, potentially could be true,” he said. “You just wonder why she continues to want to help.”

He recommended against letting Mr. Brantley move home.

The Specter of Blame

Ten years ago, two men broke into a family home in Cheshire, Conn. on a rampage that left a mother and two children dead. The men were on parole.

Though the state’s parole system subsequently underwent a full overhaul, the specter of the Cheshire murders still haunts decisions like whether to allow Mr. Brantley to live with Ms. Eaton.

“Flip this on the side,” Richard Sparaco, the executive director of the State Board of Pardons and Paroles, said about keeping the couple apart. “Who would be at fault here if no one paid attention and all of a sudden that victim was murdered by that person? It would be: ‘Parole, they knew about this and they did not protect this person.’”

Released from the halfway house in April 2016, Mr. Brantley moved into and paid rent on a basement apartment. But he flouted the rules, spending much of his time at Ms. Eaton’s.

Almost a year passed without incident. Mr. Brantley was taking methadone and working. In December, he failed a drug test, but regained sobriety quickly.

By March, Mr. Brantley thought he was ready for a more normal life. Wanting to end his daily trips to the methadone clinic, he decided to switch to Vivitrol, a shot that blocks opioid receptors for 30 days. First, he had to wean himself off methadone. Overwhelmed by the withdrawal, he began using again.

On Easter Sunday, Mr. Brantley asked Ms. Eaton for money to buy drugs. They argued. Mr. Brantley, who had been drinking, backed Ms. Eaton against a wall, kicked her foot, pushed her into her bedroom and turned his back on her, saying, “I just want to punch you.” Instead, he kicked a door so hard it left a hole. The next day, Ms. Eaton went to the police.

By evening, Mr. Brantley was back where he started — behind bars.



Mr. Brantley at the Hartford Correctional Center in June. Christopher Capozziello for The New York Times

At the initial parole violation hearing, Ms. Eaton played down what she had told the police, saying she backed into the wall on her own and that Mr. Brantley had kicked her foot accidentally. “He did not mean to cause any harm to me at all,” she said. “He needs help. He needs, he needs mental help, because the reason that he continues to relapse is because he can’t get past a lot of things that have happened to him.”

More Rules to Break

When Mr. Brantley began to falter, the ideal person for Ms. Eaton to call would have been his parole officer, who could have found him the help he needed. But that would have risked discovery that the couple were living together. Instead Mr. Brantley was locked in a state of deceit, despite the fact that honesty is critical to recovery from addiction.

Similar considerations affect many parolees who are unsure what will happen if they admit to violating the rules. One parolee who permitted reporters to track her after her release fraternized with a fellow offender and was given a temporary 6 p.m. curfew, while another parolee who was caught drinking in his halfway house was sent back to prison.

Given Mr. Brantley's actions, the decision to keep him from living with Ms. Eaton may seem prescient. But to the couple, the restriction was a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Experts say there may be some truth to that. One of parole's central tensions is that the more rules there are, the higher the chances they will be broken.

"It's something you don't know," said Ivan Kuzyk, who tracks recidivism and other criminal justice data for the state. "By not letting him live with her, you put more stress on their relationship, and that might have gotten him using — you don't know."

To Ms. Eaton, stripping her boyfriend of his support system made no sense. "Having to struggle through it by himself puts a lot of stress on him," she said. "He's done that in the past, and it hasn't gotten him very far."

In late June, her application to visit Mr. Brantley in prison was approved.

A correction was made on July 20, 2017: An article on Monday about the life one Connecticut prisoner, Erroll Brantley Jr., has experienced since being paroled misstated the relationship between his aunt, who was murdered, and the man who killed her. He was her former boyfriend, not her former husband.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

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