
"I WAS CONFUSED. I WANTED A NORMAL LIFE. I'M ABOUT TO HAVE A BABY.... PETER YELLED AT ME AND SAID, 'STOP TALKING ABOUT A NORMAL LIFE. WHAT IS A NORMAL LIFE?'"

would want me to testify against his brother," Kemba says. "He said I could go home later." With help from a friend, Peter obtained enough money to move on. They landed in Tempe, Ariz., another college town. Peter was trying to reach the West Coast, where he thought he could find one of the women who had turned government witness against him. "I thought, 'If he found her, he would hurt her,'" Kemba says. "I said, 'Are you stupid?' He said it was his freedom at stake and he just wanted to know what she told."

~ LIFE ON THE RUN

WITH MONEY WIRED from friends and a relative of Peter's, the odyssey carried them to San Diego where the woman was believed to be living. Kemba remembers Peter staking out the house of a cousin of the woman one day in hopes of finding her. But there was no such luck. By late March, they had moved north. "He went to Seattle, a place he had an interest in from his Hampton days," Kemba says. Seattle was the New York of the West Coast. He also thought no one would find him there.

"The move was miserable. We were homeless, had no money, were living day-by-day, spending nights at the bus station, in rinky-dink hotels. And that's when I started to figure I was pregnant [again]. I also started to get fed up.

"I was confused. I wanted a normal life. We talked a lot about the woman who went to Atlanta and her baby. He said it wasn't his. I got a little aggressive. I got fed up. Whenever we needed groceries, I'd have to go by myself. Whenever we needed money, I'd have to go to the pawn shop. One day I just broke out and said, 'I want to go home. I'm about to have a baby and I just can't go to the hospital and drop a baby. I need insurance.' Peter yelled at me and said, 'Stop talking about a normal life. What is a normal life?'"

Kemba went to social services, used a fake name and told them she was pregnant. She got prenatal care and food stamps. She also was getting insistent with Peter about contacting her family. She wanted to know if her grandparents were okay, particularly Odessa's father, for whom she held a special admiration.

Peter finally acquiesced and told Kemba to telephone a cousin instead of her parents. "[The cousin] was shocked, happy to hear from me. People thought I was dead."

To conceal their whereabouts, Kemba persuaded the cousin to send money to a one of Peter's friends in Hampton. The friend forwarded the money to Peter, who used it to rent an apartment. By the end of July, Kemba called another cousin, with the same result.

"I'm still pregnant, still going to the doctor. He's riding around talking crazy, wondering what's going on. I'm still adamant about wanting to go home, and he's apologizing for the delay. He got a fake ID, opened a bank account and wrote a check to a travel agent to get me a train ticket home.

"When he gets me the ticket, I'm scared to go home. My main concern is not the police but whether my parents were

going to accept me. I said to myself, 'I may just turn around and come back.' I felt so alone, confused, scared and not sure what I was walking into. My first thought was that I had to do what I had to do to get my life back on track and to prepare for my [baby]. When the train got to the first layover stop a day later, I called Peter. He said he went to the first city where the train would have stopped to pick up passengers and he knew I'd be waiting for him."

For once, Peter was wrong. Three days later, in late August, Kemba's cousin picked her up at the train station in Richmond for the final 20-minute ride home south along I-95.

"As we pull up to the house, I'm scared. I see my dad pacing in the front window. I ring the bell. My mother and dad have open arms, saying they love me and how glad they were that I was at home. I was crying, and said, 'There's something you don't understand. I'm pregnant.' My mom said, 'I don't care. I'm just glad you're home.'"

Kemba turned herself in to federal authorities on Sept. 1, 1994, and was held without bond. On Sept. 15, Peter was placed on the "15 Most Wanted List" of the U.S. Marshals Service, triggering an expanded nationwide hunt. It was late in the month before prosecutors talked with Kemba. When they did, the lead prosecutor explained: "He didn't want me, that he wanted Peter and if I told him where Peter was, he would drop the charges."

Kemba gave them a story. Again, it was laced with lies. She wouldn't give up Peter.

"I guess I was still hoping that things could change, that he would change and things would get better," Kemba says. "I was also scared. I think he always thought my parents were responsible for this whole thing blowing up. That's another reason why I felt I had to take the burden of everything — being miserable. He had me thinking it was my parents, which had me thinking I was responsible."

While waiting to talk with the federal agents, Kemba resumed sessions with JoAnn Thomas-Wilson, the clinical psychologist. Kemba had returned home depressed and suicidal, recalls Thomas-Wilson. "She was feeling major guilt about bringing back an unwed pregnancy, being with Peter, the fact that she had lied to her parents," explains Wilson. "She was feeling major helplessness, just overwhelmed by the sum total of what her life had been like — a sham, worthless."

Several intense, heart-to-heart sessions followed and Thomas-Wilson helped Kemba examine her choices. Kemba concluded: "It was him or me and my [baby]. And every night I prayed and asked God to help me because I didn't know what to do."

On a Friday night, asleep in her jail bunk, Kemba woke up crying uncontrollably. She had dreamed Peter was in her arms dying. The next morning, Oct. 1, she called her dad and said she wanted to talk to her new lawyer, Robert Wagner. The family had switched lawyers because of limited finances and disagreements over tactics. She told her father that she was ready to tell all and finally end the nightmare.

By Monday morning, when her lawyer arrived to make

arrangements with the federal prosecutor, there was startling news. Responding to a series of anonymous phone calls over the weekend, Seattle police had located 31-year-old Peter Michael Hall in an apartment in the university district. He was dead of a gunshot wound to the head, apparently killed on the previous night — hours after Kemba had her dream. Based on tips, the U.S. Marshals Service had been searching the Seattle area for Peter for about a week before the slaying. But, as had been the case throughout the search for him, without Kemba's help, federal agents always found themselves arriving too late.

"Initially, I was heartbroken," Kemba says. "Then I was relieved for myself. It was like I felt a sense of freedom. And I was relieved because the running was over. Then, I was heartbroken because I felt his death was my fault. I went back into my jail cell wondering if he was in heaven or in hell."

There were news accounts in Seattle and southeastern Virginia of Peter's death. The medical examiner's office in King County, Wash., said it was unsuccessful in finding a relative to claim Peter's body. After three months, the county coroner gave the body to Southwest Mortuary, a local establishment whose turn it was to bury unclaimed bodies. There was no funeral, no graveside service. Peter Michael Hall was buried unceremoniously in Mt. Olivet Cemetery in Renton, Wash. His death remains an open case, according to Seattle police.

A few days after news of Peter's death, Kemba followed the advice of her lawyer and pleaded guilty to federal charges of conspiracy to distribute cocaine, lying to federal authorities and conspiracy to launder drug money. While several other charges were later dismissed on the motion of the government, Kemba had accumulated a shopping list of legal transgressions, her lawyers would later acknowledge at her sentencing hearing.

According to court records, she had carried and concealed illegal weapons; ridden in a van carrying drugs from New York to North Carolina; carried money, strapped to her body like a mule, from Virginia to New York; obstructed justice when she rented apartments in her name to conceal Peter's identification; provided transportation for a suspected felon by purchasing a vehicle for Peter in her name; laundered money by forwarding it to Peter while he was on the run from federal authorities; forged birth certificates and other ID; and obstructed justice by denying to federal agents the knowledge she had about Peter's where-



Clinical psychologist JoAnn Thomas-Wilson counsels the Smith family.

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abouts. On a personal level, she had betrayed herself, her parents and her future.

Despite the seriousness of the charges, there was some hope for Kemba, her family and her lawyer that her 11th-hour confession and Peter's death would provide her the same leniency that some of her girlfriends from Hampton had received. Most had turned state's evidence, helped put the other gang members in jail and were released to put their lives back together; one was placed in the federal witness protection program. But to the surprise of everyone, the government moved to have Kemba, then seven months pregnant, held in jail until sentencing. Frustrated federal prosecutors apparently were in no mood to deal, especially on the more serious charges of conspiracy and lying to fed-

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eral agents. In a last-ditch effort, the family turned to another lawyer, William P. Robinson Jr., of Norfolk. Wagner, who became co-counsel to Robinson as Kemba's case went to sentencing. The family wanted to have benefit of local counsel who might be more familiar with the court.

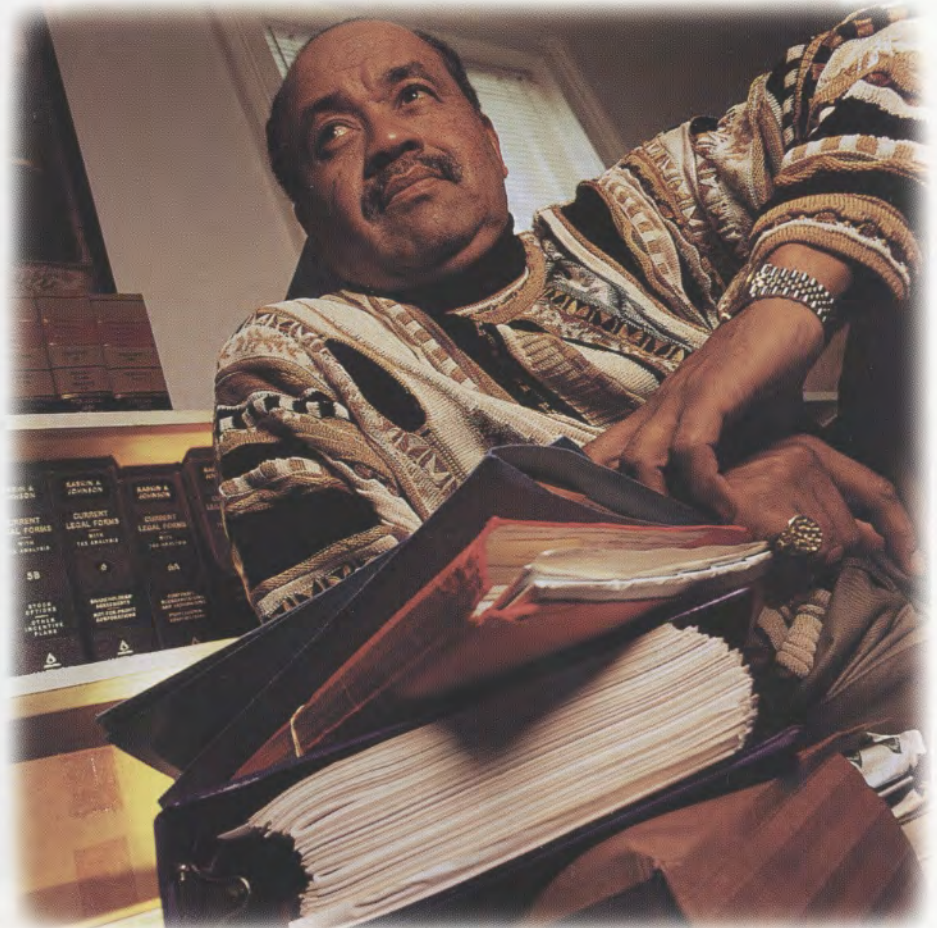
In December 1994, four months before her sentencing, Kemba gave birth to her son, William Armani Smith. She was allowed to breast-feed him once and to see him for only two days. That stay was a compromise the hospital forced upon the marshals, who wanted to return Kemba to prison an hour after she gave birth. Kemba and "Mani," as he is called, have not been together since, except for an occasional prison visit. The baby is being reared by Kemba's parents, who are receiving \$131 each month in public assistance to support him.

The federal courtroom in Norfolk was filled with well-wishers on April 20, 1995, the first day of the two-day sentencing hearing. Family members were there. Co-workers of Gus and Odessa were there. So were neighbors. Also present to show support for the family was Roy West, the former mayor of Richmond; Ed Murray, a former director of corrections for the state of Virginia; members of St. Peter Baptist Church in which Kemba grew up in in suburban Richmond and Mt. Olive Baptist Church in Norfolk, to which Gus' family belonged. Several dozen people had written the sentencing judge vouching for Kemba's character, with more than a few asserting that, if anything, Kemba was guilty of being naive.

Robinson, a veteran state legislator and no stranger to drug cases in the Tidewater area, made an impassioned plea for the court's mercy. He recited the criminal offenses and declared Kemba "does not deny factually the conduct, any of the conduct, that brings her to the court...."

"All of this could have been avoided if she were of her own mind," Robinson argued. He pointed out that two psychologists for the defense, one of whom was Thomas-Wilson, characterized Kemba's conduct as consistent with that of a battered woman. She was acting under "coercion and duress," Robinson insisted, citing a factor in which federal sentencing guidelines would allow the judge to apply a lower mandatory sentence.

But Fernando Groene, the assistant U.S. attorney handling



Veteran Virginia Rep. William P. Robinson Jr. helped present Kemba's case.

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the drug ring case, painted a different picture. Though the pre-sentencing investigation report on Kemba states she did not sell cocaine nor cocaine base, she "was aware of the organization's activities and aided and abetted the conspiracy."

Groene declared: "Judge, the real tragedy of this case is that this is a drug case and that the distribution of drugs by the people who the defendant assisted, those lives are also ruined. She hasn't expressed remorse for the lives that those drugs have destroyed. ...She turned her back on her parents, on the laws, on society, on the people who were being threatened...people who were being killed...and the only possible explanation is she did it willingly for the love of Mr. Hall, not because she was afraid of him."

After both sides presented their arguments, it was time for U.S. District Judge Richard B. Kellam to be heard.

“WE TRY NOT TO LOOK BACK AND SECOND-GUESS....
IT DOESN'T HELP US. FAITH IN GOD KEEPS US GOING.”



Kemba shares a rare moment with her son and parents.

“Putting the defendant in incarceration will certainly not benefit her tremendously,” Kellam declared. “I think that the purpose of it is, and the only purpose of it, is a deterrent to others, that everyone knows that if they violate the law, they must pay the penalty.”

~ HER DAY IN COURT

WITH SENTENCING GUIDELINES and mandatory minimum laws in hand, Kellam announced 24-year-old Kemba's sentence: 294 months on the conspiracy charge, 60 months on a money laundering charge and 60 months for lying to authorities, the latter two sentences to run concurrently with the first. That's 24.5 years in jail — one for each year of Kemba's life.

“I think it's a sad mistake that she's made. It's a sad position that she's in, and she's placed her family in an even sadder position,” Kellam told the courtroom. “But the law is the law.... I am just of the opinion I am not willing to say that her actions and conduct were controlled by her love for Peter Hall or her fear of

Peter Hall. It went on for too long a period of time for that to have existed.”

A stunned hush filled the courtroom. Kemba cried as she was led back to a holding cell. Well-wishers also wept. As they left the courtroom, Gus and Odessa were sobbing. Outside, Odessa collapsed. As Gus swept her up, Robinson sought to reassure her. “It's not the end,” he said. “It's not the end.” Perhaps.

Gus and Odessa's life's savings have been depleted by Kemba's legal troubles. Lawyers' fees have exceeded \$25,000, and the meter is still running. Counseling costs for the family have run into the thousands. Keeping in touch with Kemba also is expensive, with long distance telephone bills reaching \$500 some months.

Friends and members on both sides of the family have pitched in with money and moral support. Neighbors offer words of comfort, a smile of hope, a babysitter. “We try not to look back and second-guess ourselves,” says Odessa, struggling to maintain her composure. “We don't dwell on it. It doesn't help us. Faith in God keeps us going.”

The rest of the drug ring also is paying a penalty on charges including conspiracy, possession of powder cocaine and crack with the intent to distribute, firearms violations and murder. “Unique” Hall has been sentenced to life; Frankie D. Thomas, life; Rodney Gainey, 324 months; John Stokes, 324 months; Norman McAllister, 210 months; and Patrick Avent, 188 months.

At the Federal Corrections Institution for Women in Danbury, Conn., Kemba is trying to make peace with herself, her family and society. She pauses for a minute when asked what she got out of the relationship, beyond a baby and nearly 25 years in prison. A look of disbelief sweeps across her face. “Out of a total of everything, I had one pearl ring, two diamond rings, two gold chains and a bracelet. Down the road, it got pawned, all of it. As for benefits, I don't have anything.... A few clothes, Polo, you know, material things I shouldn't even be in. I should be in business attire.”

Kemba is now taking classes in self-esteem, assertiveness and reducing co-dependency. She's in the drug program to make sure she never even wants to touch an illegal substance again. She hopes to finish college through prison and correspondence programs. She's working in the prison's education department, helping inmates who are about to be released write résumés and complete college applications. She volunteers in the prison's children's center to help out when families come to meet loved ones. “How in the world am I going to explain this?” Kemba wonders, thinking about her son, who may be an adult before she is free.

“I want to be responsible and independent and know the real meaning of happiness and love. I want to take care of my child,” Kemba says. She tries not to spend a lot of time looking back, “except to learn from my mistakes. I made some bad decisions. I don't put the blame on anybody.” ■

