

# "How Do You See Me?"

by Anjelique Wadlington

*Anjelique began writing in 2004 with Herstory's first work- shop in Suffolk County's correctional facilities, so that her journey to give voice to incarcerated women begins with our own. From that moment on, she has never stopped writing. Nor has she stopped working to help others through her words, so that even when she was sent up-state to complete her sentence she stayed in close touch. In 2008, when she was released she became part of our first group of speakers, reading to students of criminology, sociology and law all over Long Island, and took part in the organization of a "bridges" workshop to allow women coming out of jail to write with women from the larger community. In response to the problems that re-entry poses for so many who dream about changing their directions while writing in jail, she developed a "Herstory Inside Out" Facebook page to help women who wrote together to find one another upon their release and to raise awareness of political issues affecting the formerly incarcerated upon re-entry. While working full-time, she attends Suffolk County Community College, through a scholarship that will cover her expenses through graduate school, wherever she decides to study next, allowing her to work toward her dream of becoming a social worker.*

*The story that we have reproduced here—"How do you see me?"—was commissioned by the Women on the Job Project of the Long Island Fund for Women and Girls, to illuminate what happens when women with felony convictions seek employment, and has been read by various task forces working on Second Chance legislation which would allow for the expunging of criminal records for perpetrators of nonviolent crimes who have stayed within the confines of the law for a five-year period following their release.*



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I did my last check in my rearview mirror, my make up was perfect. Nice and simple, I had left it natural with a light lipgloss. My hair was straightened with a little flip in the front. I wanted to make a great impression. Mommy had always told me, "Your first impression is the only and most important impression you can make." So I always made sure of it. The sun was shining bright and at its peak, so I knew everything was going to go without a hitch.

Change wasn't anything I was fond of; I hate having to jump into things or rearranging my daily schedule. I was perfectly fine until I noticed I had to get out of my car and hit the alarm. I wasn't in my skin, because I had to enter another. I felt grown and professional when I dressed up. Like the people do in the City. They looked important, which made me feel important, *I want a cigarette, I need to calm my nerves, I just don't want to smell like I just came from a bar, walking into the building.* The building wasn't too far from where I had parked, so I just had to tough it out.

I decided to wear black slacks creased to perfection by my own hands. Like I had learned when I wore my uniforms. It's been a few years since then. I haven't really needed to use an iron recently, but some skills you never forget. I had decided to go with a nice simple button-down blouse with a bright tank top underneath. "Never show any of your secret

body parts, you don't want to portray something you aren't," Mommy had said to me over the phone as I got dressed earlier.

It seemed to be a longer walk than I thought it would be, or my feet were just dragging and digging into the concrete. *What will they ask? Will they like me? Or am I just like everyone else? Will I get a chance to explain my answer?*

I don't know really know what to expect. I just hope they give me the chance. Picking my head high and hands to my side, I knew I was out of place. *What am I doing here?* Another thought crossed my mind, as I seemed to walk slower.

I felt the slacks hit my legs in each step I took—one was green and one black. My shoes decided to feel flat. I was no longer wearing my heels. My feet started to hurt. My boots were tight, hot, and sweaty. My shirt seemed to get tighter at the neck, as the bowtie got more uncomfortable.

I gave myself a quick glance down to see that I was no longer in my semi suit, but I was in full uniform of forest green and white. My pants were no longer black. They had become inmate green. I felt the goose bumps run across my arms and a feeling of embarrassment as everyone pointed and laughed. The number read across my shirt 05g0418. I realized that I had jumped out of my professional skin into a skin I didn't want to be in anymore, but lived with for years and recognized well, one that I had left years ago to die.

I walked to the building. *Ready Anj? Take a deep breath*, I told myself getting closer and closer to the office building. I placed my hand on the door and jumped into my white girl skin, just still black. It had worked a lot over the years when I had to speak to clients over the phone or complaining customers when I used to work at Bagel Boss. I entered the quiet fully carpeted office.

"Hello, may I help you?" a tall man had asked.

"Yes, my name is Anjelique. I am here to speak with Joe Lepton," as I extended my right hand out to shake his pale cold hand. My dad used to tell me you can tell a lot in a person by their handshake. If it was firm, weak. It gives them character without having to say a word.

"Yes, that's me," as he firmly shook my hand back. *Strong willed*, I thought to myself.

"I had called you yesterday morning for the job that the company had listed on the internet," I said as I looked him in his eyes.

"Yes, it is nice to meet you. Come, come in."

He seemed to be uneasy after I had told him that I was the woman who had called him. The dumb found look on his face, as I have seen many times over the years. When the voice doesn't match the other person's body, or color.

We walked to a smaller office around the corner where it looked like they have their business meetings. It’s real, a REAL office, where real things are discussed. I was so amazed to actually be invited in. He directed me to sit across from him.

“So did you fill out the application?” he asked.

“No, Sir, I haven’t.”

“Okay,” as he shuffled in the bottom draw of the desk we sat at. He pulled out a book . . . well, it seemed to be. I looked wide-eyed and shook my head before he started to raise his body up. “Okay, fill this out and we will talk after you are done,” he directed me.

“Yes.” I had responded back with a light smile. He got up and excused himself and headed toward the office door.

“Do you have a pen?” he asked trying to test my preparation skills.

One thing I had learned on my own throughout the years. Always be prepared for the unknown. You never know when you need a pen and paper. I nodded yes. And he exited the office and closed the door lightly.

Breezing through the first few basic knowledge questions of myself and morality questions I had stumbled and ignored one. If I didn’t know, I skipped. Finish the rest and go back to it later on towards the end of the test. I hear all my exam

teachers' voices over the years of test taking. Maybe I just didn't want to face these questions. Or maybe I didn't want them to know my weakness and what I feared.

*Have you ever been convicted of a felony? If yes, for what and when?*

The question was there. In plain sight! It wasn't going to go anywhere. I went around the question. I tried to even act like it didn't even exist. I really just wanted to get up and walk out. Maybe even lie. How will they find out? I thought I had dealt with it, but I was not ready to face it. Yes . . .

I just stared at the completed application. Incomplete thoughts and "what if's" and "I just hope so." Until a light knock on the door and his head popped in.

"Everything okay?" he asked cheerfully.

"Yes," and I turned my head looking back and smiled. He came in and sat back into his chair and looked over the application. He nodded his head as if he was impressed. I just made sure I always looked at him and smiled.

"Okay. I have two questions. First, why should I hire you?"

I really wanted to say, *Because I need a job. And I am broke and I am parole mandated.* But I didn't, I couldn't sound desperate. So I was logical about it. And he just nodded and smiled while I answered his question.

"Good, I like that. Question Two, I see you checked yes for being convicted of a felony and that you will explain in interview. Well, here is your chance." And he sat there and made it so easy.

"I was young . . . 17; I sold drugs to an undercover for my boy- friend. He told to save his own ass, but I had refused to talk or to have knowledge of anyone else in the drug game." He just actually sat there and listened, the last stranger to ever listen to me was no one.

"I learned my lesson, but that doesn't define who I am. And what I can be. I am a very loyal and dependable person. I complete what I start," I commented before he spoke.

"I will hire you, I think this is a great opportunity for you, and you will be a huge asset to this company. Call me on Monday for your schedule so we can set you up with a patient," he said extending his hand to shake mine.

I was part of something! The cocoons hatched and the wings spread wide. They were beautiful and ready to continue their journey. I wanted to scream for joy and excitement, but it had to wait.

"Thank you, thank you so much," as I shook his hand back and exited the small office, around the corner to the door, to exit my past and enter a promising future doing what I loved.

The weekend seemed to not matter. I was working Monday, and nothing made me change my mood, or steal my shine.



Monday came and I was up at 6 A.M. I got myself together and waited until the office opened at 8. "Good morning, Senior Care. How may I direct your call?" the receptionist had answered on the other end.

"Yes I would like to speak to Joe Lepton. My name is Anjelique Wadlington."

"Hold, please." The music came on to keep me entertained.

"Anjelique, Hi how are you?" Joe had answered on the line.

"I am doing well, and yourself?" being polite.

"Well, thank you. I looked over your application and I spoke to my brother who is my partner. And I am sorry, but it isn't going to work out," he informed me. I just stood in my bedroom in silence. I was heartbroken. And the tears flooded my eyes.

"Okay. Thank you. Have a good day." And I hung up quickly. I felt my final sentencing. The judge has spoken once again, and my fate was in his hand . . .