

Visiting Hours

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I pushed my hands through my hair, leaning against the window of my car. Everything about today threatened to push me over the edge: the stopped traffic on the highway, the sky, which couldn't decide if it was raining or not, the way the air conditioning blew on my face no matter which direction I pushed the vents. I looked at the newspaper on the passenger seat again, the one that had now been there for four months. Its pages were creased, the pictures sun-faded, but the article I had fixated on, had obsessively read, lay facedown.

I sneered at it, cursing myself for leaving it there. I should have thrown it away months ago. I could have spared myself the visceral disgust I felt as I looked at the finely printed lines tattooing the pages. Instead, I let it linger, let it sit there and mock me every time I saw it.

Looking back to the road, I saw the miles of traffic surrounding me. The line of stopped trucks, RVs, and motorcycles was so irritating my skin began to itch all over, a rash of stress coating my body. I leaned my face into the air again, felt the hairs whip my face, leaned out of the wind's path, checked the map to see how much longer it would be. Thirty more minutes. Thirty more minutes of the newspaper staring at me and the engines rumbling and the vents and the sky's indecisiveness. I turned off the air and rolled down the windows. Using the opportunity to glance around, I saw buffaloes fenced into a large pasture, out of place in the surrounding cornfields and prairies. Looking at them, I had to laugh. Of course they would box up animals here as well, keep the migratory creatures trapped over the space of a few miles.

The line of cars inched forward momentarily and stopped again. I slammed on the brakes and screamed in frustration, hitting my hands on the wheel. An elderly man in the car next to me saw me, put his hand over his heart, and smiled. I flipped him off and pulled forward, out of his line of sight. I fiddled with the radio, turned it on and then off again. I put my hair in a precarious bun on top of my head. Took it out. Picked at the remaining rose gold nail polish on my fingernails. Tapped my fingers against the steering wheel. The dashboard. My leg. After an eternity of waiting, I saw my destination in the distance. It had to be the jail. Nowhere else would have that many fences.

I pulled into the parking lot and approached the building, expecting high metal gates and spools of three-foot barbed wire topping the fences. Instead, I was met with tan, cinder block walls and a huge metal door with a disproportionately small window set in the middle. The stone was almost worse than the fences; heavy, unyielding, secretive.

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Pulling on the door, I felt the resistance of its weight.

The guard inside was just as unfriendly. I assume she had been hardened by years of watching children, spouses, and parents approach her with tear-lined eyes and shrunken shoulders. She had probably seen thousands, even hundreds of thousands of visitors walk by her into despair. Slowly, I approached her desk. She was fuzzy behind the fingerprint-smearing, bulletproof glass encasing her. Before I walked forward, she began speaking, a speech apparently so routine that she only glanced up from her monitor once while giving it.

“Take off your jacket, give me your phone, keys, wallet, and fill out this form.”

She pushed the paperwork and a pen through a slit in the bottom of the glass. I glanced over the pages, scanning for places to put my shaky initials. Once I had turned in the forbidden items and pushed the clipboard back under, she looked through the document with one hand held up, signaling me to wait for her approval. She remained disinterested as she read. After what felt like an eternity, she waved me forward and pushed a button that opened the next metal door with a deep buzzing sound.

The inside of the visiting room surprised me, a sea of tan jumpsuits and hung heads. Not like what you see in those prison TV shows, the ones with the orange and the yelling and the threats. At least not here, where visitors could see you. No, here it was just over-washed khaki and shame, nonviolent criminals clumped together to wait out their sentences.

As I looked around the room, a number was called over the intercom. I walked toward the one empty table left, a short square foot or two with a set of worn-down chairs placed around it. I tried to scoot in, wanting to hide more of my feet, but I found the chair wouldn't move, stuck in place not only by bolts but by years of rust cementing it to the stained tile floor. I sat there for a minute, avoiding eye contact with everyone around me, unsure of what to do now that I was stripped of my possessions. Over the sound of the conversations around me, I heard a door swing shut, the same metallic banging that had followed me into the room.

I looked up and saw him, the one island of familiarity in this place, the one thing that should have brought comfort, but didn't. I was suddenly aware of every muscle in my body; felt my lips twitch downward and my stomach heave and my chest contract and the blood rush to my hands, then my feet, constantly downward, away from my brain. As he walked towards me I stood up, sat down, stood up. It was only as I was falling again that he reached me, grabbed for my hands, and held me as I tried to remain upright.

“Hi, dad,” I said.

I fell against him, felt the rise and fall of his breathing as I used him

for support. I was buried against his chest, the way I used to hide when I was little and we would watch Star Wars and Darth Vader came on the screen. Unfortunately, the disinterested guard picked that moment to look out into the room.

“Move apart.” Her voice echoed between my ears, made me acutely aware that I was not at home, that I was here, in a prison, visiting my father.

I let go and stood on my side of the table, pausing a moment before I sat down. His movements slowly mirrored mine.

“How are you?” I asked quietly.

He looked around and shrugged.

“I’m here,” he said.

The drab faces encircling my vision on all sides painted a grim vision of his experience, a prison purgatory—in low-security, but imprisoned nonetheless. He was subject to searches, made to stay in line, to tolerate verbal abuse from those corralling him. At least that was the one thing those shows all got right: these were not people. They were numbers, dehumanized and disregarded.

“So, how have you been?” he began awkwardly.

“Good, it’s been good. I got the lead in the school play,” I said. “Sandy, from Grease.”

I saw his look of shock and pride. It had taken me four years to prove my talent to my director, to get the female lead in any show, let alone a musical.

“Wow, I bet that’ll be really great.”

“Yeah, thanks. I’ll make sure to record it for you.”

As we sat there in the hours we were allotted, he told me stories of the other inmates. I knew he was trying to convince himself that he didn’t belong there, that he was saner, less dangerous than the prisoners surrounding him.

“One of these guys, Bill, his new thing is alligator soup.”

“Alligator soup?”

“It was a teapot full of cafeteria beef and water.”

I tried not to gag and instead let him purge the stories from his system. The more I learned, the more uncomfortable I became, picturing the dad I had grown up with dropped here. There would be no mixtapes or chocolate-covered blueberries, no driving around on brick roads or watching old movies. He was stuck here, with alligator soup and khaki jumpsuits and thick, brick walls enclosing him.

I looked at him again and saw not my father, but what the guards, the taxpayers, the law saw him as. A middle-grade drug dealer. Not

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society's biggest threat, but an outlaw nonetheless, someone who needed to be locked away in order to send the message that his behavior wasn't tolerated, that he wasn't tolerated. I rocked back and forth in my rusted chair, holding back tears, unable to listen to him anymore. He stopped his story and asked me if I was alright. I inhaled, the breaths catching in my chest. I couldn't answer him, could only ask a question in return.

“Why are you here? Why did you do the things that got you here?”

He stared at me, caught off guard by my question. Confrontation was not a trait of mine; it never had been. We sat in silence for a while before he finally answered.

“I don't know.”

It wasn't an answer, but he was never good at those. Lack of explanation had followed every familial tragedy, like when his father died or he lost his job or when he left my mother. I went to the bathroom to blow my nose, then returned to finish listening to his stories. My recovery was quick; unknowns were my norm.

At last, visiting hours released their clutch on me. I tried to figure out a way to stop my heart from beating against my chest, tried to mentally reach inside myself and push it into place as I said goodbye, and gathered my belongings back from the guard. It took all of my power not to sprint back to the parking lot, to keep my steps even and slow. When I finally reached my car, I opened the door and slid into the seat, only to be greeted by the newspaper.

I leaned over and grabbed it, crumpling the pages beneath my fist, obscuring the story I practically knew by heart.

Cross-Country Drug Bust Incriminates Dozens.

A list of names, punctuated by line breaks, committing his identity to a felony for the rest of his life. The ink had soaked into the pages, black-and-white representations of a three-dimensional whole. The people who read the article would never know the way he watched golf because it reminded him of his father or the frustrated rasp his voice would get or how it felt to hug him after he came home from work. They would only ever know that he was part of a drug ring, that he had made a series of bad decisions and gotten caught, that he would face the consequences. They would never know his regret or his depression, would never hear the way he had apologized to me the first time I had spoken to him after he got caught. They would never know anything about him besides what was on that paper.

I sat in my car and tore up the article, piece by piece until no amount of puzzling could put it back together. The gas pedal hit the floor as I drove out of the parking lot, accelerating away from the jail, past the buffaloes, back to my now-fatherless home. As I sped down the highway away from the jail, I grabbed the pieces of newspaper off my lap and threw them out the window, letting them stream behind me.