

The Visit

by Jiordan Castle

There are never any white families. It's a medium security prison with some minimum-security inmates like my father. They put prisoners wherever they can fit them, stacking people in cells like chickens in a coop. We wait our turn to be called – the Castle family, minus my sisters, both with the same last name, different than mine. They're away at school. They come when they can.

We put keys, rings, and bags on a conveyor belt, just like at the airport. They pat us down; they give us back some of our things. We're allowed to bring one clear bag full of change for the vending machine. On the first visit, my mother didn't know the rule and my father couldn't get a snack during our hour. This time, she brings a Ziploc bag full of quarters and dollar bills, just in case.

There are a lot of little kids, some of them babies, in the elevator with us. Security guards take small groups up to the second floor, where we wait to be let into the visiting room. I pick two seats by the window. When the guards let them out, it's a sea of orange and khaki jumpsuits. My father, roughly 5'8" and stocky, perhaps muscular, tanner than I've ever seen him, walks over to us, his face sallow and freckled. We hug for the allowed time – somewhere between five and ten seconds, approximately – and he sits down across from us. There are no signs posted, but the arbitrary time limit is enforced. It's a social construct, like so much of prison life is – even this, the time it takes to greet a person. We can sit together, but we aren't supposed to touch. There are few exceptions.

This is the second time in a year that I've seen my father, and it may be the last. My parents were divorced less than a year ago – my mother still in love, my father in the first half of his four-year sentence. They got divorced to save us from his unending debt, but also because he was mentally ill. At his final sentencing, I heard it argued that his illness prevented him from conducting business properly. Nearly two years later, in this box that has little in common with a room aside from its four walls, his illness is more or less the same. But here it comes to life; it's the only thing that separates him from any of the other inmates. He needs it to survive.

He talks about his music and how he's been helping inmates working toward their GED. My father went to Stonybrook and Hofstra. He was a professor and a banker before he came here, and now he teaches grown men how to read. He doesn't get in too much trouble with the bigger guys here because he can help them write letters to their children. He tells me about an inmate known for his temper – he says very little, beats the shit out of most guys – who asked for help writing a card to a daughter he'd never met.

“He asked me how to spell ‘birthday,’” he says, his eyes glossy. “Birthday.”

My mother holds his hand. She listens to him. She tells him that he looks good. I scan the room. The walls are a murky shade of white, like a dusty eggshell, the tiles worn and cracked beneath my feet. Long, fat fluorescent tubes of light hang above us, threatening to break. I can count on one hand the number of teenagers here; female teenagers, even fewer.

I get up to get my dad a drink – Crystal Light pink lemonade, his favorite. The prison has a canteen, like at summer camp, where the men can buy small goods like candy and cigarettes with the change they save from working. They don't have drinks

though. My father makes less than a dollar an hour from working in the library and doing labor outside. It's more than most. At the end of his four years in prison, he'll have made less than a thousand dollars, about half of which will be his to take home. So my mom pays for his pink lemonade.

I fumble with the plastic bag at the vending machine. A guard to my left watches me. He watches as I insert four quarters and drop the fifth. I turn to watch as it rolls on its side, a gray speck spinning away from me. It stops against a pair of worn off-white sneakers, the same pair my father has. These have no shoelaces.

He is a six-foot tall traffic cone, with dark skin and eyes, his heavy palm holding my quarter just out of reach. As the hand reaches mine, I see the security guard, now to my right, tense. He slowly moves his hand to his gun. He rests it there. He never looks at me; he only eyes the man before me. His is not a look of hate, but of haste. For a moment, I feel sure that something is going to happen. But the hand covers mine, the quarter dropping into my small palm, his fingertips rough and calloused.

"This yours?" he asks. I nod.

I put the quarter into the machine, my pulse thumping in my ears, all the blood in my body swimming around, confused. If it was fear, I didn't know it. I just put the money in and carry an artificially pink plastic bottle back to my dad, silent.

Behind my father, maybe twenty feet away, there's a row of twelve men in orange, with women in low-cut tops and screaming babies bouncing on their knees. A boy ignores a fight between an inmate and the woman visiting him. He's on a Game Boy. I don't know how he got it in here. He must have gotten special permission.

My father has shoelaces because he's never murdered anyone. He's never raped anyone. He's not on suicide watch. He has shoelaces in his sneakers because he likes to exercise when he can – walk the track outside, move around. He has a khaki jumpsuit. He owned a bank and wore ties before coming here.

But he didn't have shoelaces when he first got here. Prison suicides are most popular among middle-aged white males. Studies show that they'd rather hang themselves than get murdered in jail. But my father is funny, darkly so, and a lot of inmates like that. They respond to it. He plays guitar with some of the guys. They call him "Maestro."

His guitar has only three strings. It's harder to play for people that way, he says, but if you're good, you're good. Longtime prisoners use the strings for tattooing, draining ink from pens and practicing on themselves; the backs of thighs, shoulders, whatever's handy. My dad doesn't want one, although a lot of guys offer to pay him for guitar lessons in ink.

I wish he could've gone to a psychiatric prison in New York. He doesn't get his medication. But being crazy in here might be a good thing. That's what he tells me on the phone, three months later, after his nose has been broken in a fight and he's put in solitary confinement for a week.

The man from the vending machine is somewhere in the row of twelve, with a kid on his lap and a woman in front of him. His son is probably three or four. I wonder what he's done. My father surely knows, but I don't ask. And when visiting hours end, after my mother has nodded her head off and worn her smile thin, we stand up to say goodbye.

When my father hugs her for longer than the allotted ten seconds, a guard tells him to get off of her.

She says, “Fuck you” and hugs my father again. It’s a small sound in her mouth, and no one hears but the three of us – my father, the guard, and me. It seems to pain her to say it, even though the words themselves are freeing. My mother doesn’t curse much.

He asks if I want the rest of his drink. It’s nearly empty in his hand, a nauseating pink color not found in nature, cap pointed up at me. I say no, I want him to have it. But he can’t take it back in. The guard tells him he’s got to leave it behind.

Once outside, I throw away the bottle, past the hedges that someone gets paid 12 cents an hour to trim.