

The Visit

by Victoria Roberts



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I wake up. I look for something to wear. I can't wear orange or green. I call down, "Ma, you ready? I'm dressed."

I'm in the car with my Mom. We drive in silence. I am thinking, this is my fault. I feel so guilty. I wonder if my mother is thinking the same thing.

We pull up to the place. Barbed wire is everywhere. There are lines, long lines. We go and check in. We pass through the metal detectors. I beep. I have to take my bra off, it has underwire. Oh no! My shirt is white, see-through! They give me another shirt. It is not new. It is a shirt that other women in my circumstances have worn. I can leave or I can put the shirt on. I put the shirt on. My Mom is already through. She knew not to wear an underwire bra. Did she remember from when she came to visit me?

I'm through. We sit. We wait. My Mom is nervous. This is her first time for this child. We wait some more. My Mom looks scared. This is the woman who does not eat cucumbers because she picked bushels of them for 50 cents a bushel in 1954. She was 10 years old then. This is the woman who raised five kids. She looks small as we wait some more. "What's taking so long?" she asks. I say I don't know but I know. They are being strip-searched. I cannot tell her that they are in the room naked, bent over, coughing.

Why are we here in this piss-yellow room? Why are there more women with children than men? This room is supposed to be bright but the dull dismal yellow makes it seem dark even though it is 10 a.m. There are long rows of chairs bolted to the floor. We are seated. There is a raised partition. We hear the *swoosh bang!* They just rolled the bars back. They are coming! I see him! I burst into tears and start saying, "I'm sorry," before he can even see me. We hug. "NO TOUCHING!" says the guard. "If you touch him again that will be the end of your visit."

My son. My firstborn.

"Hi, Ma."

"You okay, babe?"

"I'm good. Stop crying, Ma. I can't do this if you keep crying."

My brother is my mother's firstborn. I didn't see him come out. My mother does not touch him. She heard what the guard said. Why are they both here? My mother did not use drugs and my brother is here. My mother worked and kept us with food, clothing, shelter. I did none of that. In fact, everyone else took care of my sons, even the system when they were placed in foster care for a short while. I remember providing shelter when we lived in a car in Ohio. Is that part of this guilt I feel? Is that why we are here today?

My Mom. She was the first person that prayed for me to get help. Back then, there was no help. I was a criminal not a person with a disease. My mother kept the family together. When she found out my kids were in foster care in another state she was there in two days. Now she is here with her daughter, her oldest son and her grandson. How did we get here?

"How is my brother?" my son asks.

"He is fine," I answer. "He has grown some."

He always worries about his little brother. He was the one who took care of him when I was . . . His little brother was born addicted. Even in my stupor there was no sound like the crying of a baby going through withdrawal. Piercing! Painful! Sad!

"Ma, this ain't your fault," he says now. But I can't help feel, yes, yes it is. "If I had made better choices you may have made better choices," I tell him.

He says, "Grandma made great choices and my uncle is in this visiting room too."

He knew what I was thinking and feeling. How could this young man who is so sensitive and attuned to others be in custody?

"Do you want me to bail you out?" I ask. "Do you want me to get you out of here?"

Everything changes with those two questions. His face becomes hard, his body tense. His eyes narrow to a point. His attitude shifts, as fast as the clouds when a storm is coming.

“What?” he says. “Now you want to help?” My sweet son has let his guard down. His anger has gotten the best of him. “Oh, so now you want to be someone’s mother?”

I hear him continue but I can’t listen to what he is saying. I know he wants me to hug him and rub his back to help him through this like I always have. But instead, he says these things that he needs to say. These things that hurt him to his core. These things that he wants to hurt me to my core with. Those things that made him grow up way faster than he should have.

I’m crying. He’s crying. He is mad because he is in this place. He is mad that I chose drugs over him and his brother. Now that I am clean, I wonder if he felt he had no mother at times. My baby grew up so angry that he took it out on everyone in the streets. I think the anger makes him feel human because he doesn’t feel anything else.

I want to hug him. NO TOUCHING! I tell him I am sorry again and again and again. He does not hear me. I do not hear him but I am listening. His words are too hard to hear. I did hear, “I love you, Ma. This ain’t your fault.” I allowed him to say those hurtful things because he was hurting and they were his truth.

“Five minutes!” shouts the guard. Five minutes? We have been here for 45 minutes already? I start crying again. Again my son says, “Stop, Ma, it’s okay.” I’m crying because the visit is over. I’m crying because I know he will have to go back to bending over and coughing because I came to visit. I can’t help but think that I am causing more trauma.

I stand up. I reach out and grab him in an embrace. Tight, hard, trying to say all that I did not say in this visit with this hug. “Hey, no touching!” says the guard. I don’t care. The visit is over anyway. I didn’t see if my mother hugged her son. I wave bye to my brother. We leave the visiting room. “Wait,” says the guard in the booth. I forgot to give them their shirt back.

Outside. The air. The breeze. There are still long lines. More women and children than men. We head to the car. I see familiar faces in the crowd. I wave to some people. No one talks, we just wave. We all know how sad it is to leave a visit and how sad it is to have to visit. We leave each other in our own kind of silent grief.

In the car. Silence. Tears. My tears. My Mom is stoic, she always is. Saying nothing, she reaches out for my hand. We hold hands. We pass the green of the golf course and the golfers smiling and chatting with each other. A golf course across the street from the jail. Really? How dare they be happy when so much grief and trauma are happening across the street?

We drive in silence for a while and suddenly my Mom begins to talk.

"We have overcome so much," she says. "We will get through this too. This is not your fault nor is it mine."

"We all have to be tested." she says. She says her test was me and my test is my son.

"Why are we tested?" I ask. She says so that our superpowers will develop. She is silent after that leaving me to think some more. Superpowers?

Where do we go from here? I'm thinking to myself now. Can we become better? As a family?

We all have a story to tell. Why is my story important? And why do I want to tell it?