

GUARDED JUDGMENT

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Nervous and unsure of what to expect, my mother and I traveled three and a half hours to my father's first correctional facility. My mother, who had lived a sheltered and privileged life, was by far more anxious about this pending experience than I. The entire car ride up I did my best to ignore my mother's spiteful utterances; I was too young to understand my family's situation. Even to this day, I'm not sure I fully comprehend it. I did my best to console my mother, who claimed she didn't need consoling, but whose visage constantly suggested otherwise. Looking down with a furrowed brow, she would stutter out repetitive reassuring words, look up, breathe, and force a smile to stop her eyes from welling up; the smile was meant to appease me. It looked more like a frown. Because I was fourteen, I could only visit a maximum-security prison with a legal guardian. Unfortunately, the facility's website, obscure and poorly documented, did not mention that I would need two forms of ID, rather than just one.

I had never been to a prison. I was beyond scared; I was terrified. And honestly, in hindsight, I'm a little embarrassed that I was. From what I had heard from one of my Westchester friends who had visited a prison on a school trip, I imagined a dirty, sad, ill-kempt place. Not exactly a "bucket-list" location.

We walked through a thick white passageway, entering a room of rusted tin lockers. To our left was a small wobbly table with baskets of papers. Straight ahead stood a metal detector, empty metal carts (used to place food and packages) and a large main desk, which was significantly raised from that of the floor platform. In the middle of the room, there was

a cluster of metal and plastic chairs, the kind you might find in a public high school classroom. My mother looked around, confused. She noticed a large group of people approaching the building and didn't want to have to get stuck behind them in line.

We approached a small woman at the front desk. She had short, dingy blonde hair, beady eyes and lips that seemed to purse naturally. My mother, nearly trembling, squeaked out that it was our first time visiting, and she was looking for some instruction. Without looking up, the woman answered "On the table. Fill 'em out."

My mother, a little taken back, filled out the paperwork. She seemed to be holding back tears when she approached the guard the second time. Bitch-face—as we would jokingly call her—looked up, made eye contact with my mother, shook her head, and looked down, staring at the blank desk.

"You've got to be kidding me," she muttered.

"You filled out the wrong paperwork. All of it's wrong. Your daughter doesn't even have a second form of ID. Look, maybe you should go home, and come on back another time. Hopefully when I'm not here," bitch-face rudely retorted.

My mother, perplexed and offended, demanded that we had the right to see my father and, even if we couldn't, we had food and money to bring him.

"Not today, you don't," the guard said smugly. "Please, get out of my line."

Biting my tongue, I followed my mother, and we wandered back to the end of the line where

we could gather our thoughts, which at the time were mainly just ramblings of profanities.

Witnessing all of this, the women at the back of line shared with my mother that the guard was always this sour, and that we did nothing wrong. But, whatever we do, they cautioned, do NOT report her. Do not report her, that is, if we ever plan on coming to visit on a weekend for the duration of my father's stay again.

Supposedly, the report would take months to process, be without consequence for her, and encourage her to prevent us from making it through that dingy, white corridor to the visiting room.

More importantly, the woman warned, "She'll give your husband a hard time." She continued, "You have to learn to 'kiss ass.'"

Maybe the guard was so rude because she did not like her job. It's obviously not the most cheerful place in the world to work. Dozens of people are on suicide watch, and people are literally confined to their rooms for the bulk of their days. Many prisoners don't even receive visitors.

A year later, my father was moved. We were all pleased about this transfer, hoping that our dealings with guards would be less tense, perhaps even friendly.

We had heard from my father that his interactions would be less uncomfortable there. He

never went into detail about his interactions with the guards and, knowing the dramatic person he is (as I take after him), I doubt I would have believed much anyway. He simply told us that we couldn't fathom some of the things that happened and stressed the importance of having a backbone in life.

My father, unlike my mother, grew up in a small house in a bad neighborhood outside of Philadelphia. He was not sheltered and faced adversity all his life. He was proud of what he had accomplished (his present whereabouts excluded). But when I saw him with the guards, before he entered the room and as he was leaving, it was clear that the chip on his shoulder was gone. I figured it wasn't anything. I made the common assumption most people who avidly watch *Law & Order* make: Prison changes a person.

After not visiting my father for three months—the trip was far, and I could only attend provided it worked with my mother's schedule—we were overjoyed to see him. The process was much different this time: We walked into the room, similar dingy setting, but there was music playing—Kelly Clarkson to be exact—but we weren't complaining. The guards smiled at us, greeted us and offered us a quarter for the locker when we realized we



were missing one. What a change.

The new facility provided an outdoor visiting section, weather permitting. The cement tables were much closer together and molded into the ground with plastic and metal chairs that were similar to what we used last time. We had no choice but to take notice of those around us as they were simply too close to ignore.

One inmate picked up a huge stack of photos, looking through them slowly, laughing and “aw-ing” at almost every one. Simultaneously, a guard stubbed his toe on the back of the inmate’s chair. The inmate excused himself numerous times, scooted in more, and continued to apologize profusely, making sure to address the guard as “Sir.”

The guard, after about a minute of silence, put his foot up on the empty chair next to the inmate, smiled and asked him if he was having a nice visit. The guard was smiling, but it was painfully obvious that he was not happy.

“Yes, sir, very nice, thank you,” the inmate said playing along.

At this point, my father might as well have been talking to a wall as I watched this episode take place. Could it be that this attitude among guards was widespread? Not isolated to what my mother and I jokingly referred to as “The Prison of Gloom?”

After patronizing the inmate, the guard said that he would need to confiscate the photos, as he believed they hadn’t been approved. Mind you, unless this sixty-five-year-old wife was a secret spy or undercover FBI agent, her chances of sneaking that paperwork in were slim to none. The inmate protested at first, claiming that his wife was returning shortly. He was silenced with a look.

When the wife returned, she was furious, and she was not willing to hide her feelings. It was incredibly uncomfortable to watch, yet I was mesmerized by the scene. It was like watching an embarrassing scene on television, without being able to hit mute or change the channel.

It was unfortunate that the wife argued in the way that she did. The guard returned, tossed the photos on the table and walked past the table toward another guard without saying a word. I wonder if he ever went to check for their approval, or if he was just trying to exert his power over the inmate. There’s really no way of knowing.

The wife, whose husband begged her to be silent, yelled at the guard, demanding to know why he confiscated the photos. Clearly not intimidated by the guard’s behavior, she continued yelling, claiming that he “can’t just do that.”

The wife, now doing her best to contain herself asked for the officers name and badge number, planning on reporting him to a superior officer. The guard laughed a strong, hardy laugh while writing down his information.

“You know what, you go right ahead.” He moved in closer, leaning over the table until he was only about a foot away from her face and in a terrifyingly stern voice said, “He’s my uncle.” And walked out without anyone speaking another word.

I remember watching this scene play out and being in complete shock. A few people were. But more strikingly, there were many more people not in shock. This was the norm. My dad was laughing at me, asking me, repeatedly, to stop staring in between his chuckles. Surprised by my father’s reaction, I asked him if he had seen what just happened, and he told me that things like that happen all the time.

All the time. But after he explained it to me, I understood. Who’s going to report something like that? An inmate, whose opinion is never considered, who can’t even vote, and who is regularly searched? The system makes them out to be an unreliable bunch. How would they be able to ever seriously affect the courageous, public serving police officers? To the general population, police officers are men of honor and inmates are their counterparts.

This past summer I had the opportunity to visit my father at another facility alone. I had the opportunity but truthfully, I wasn't exactly looking forward to it. Frazzled and nervous, like my mother was on our first visit, I left half the groceries my father was expecting in the back seat. It felt like I was reliving my first experience all over again.

I was following the dress code. I wore a summer skirt that went to my knee, a top that covered my chest and shoulders completely and a cardigan that covered the remainder of my arms. These visiting rooms have no windows and no air-conditioning. In the dead of August, it was about ninety degrees in there.

It was one of my nicer outfits, and not inappropriate by any means. To my complete and utter shock, the guards claimed that my outfit was far too provocative and told me that if it would be greatly appreciated I had anything in my car that I could change into. After about ten minutes of cordially "arguing" with them, they let me in under the condition that I keep my cardigan on for the entire stay. It was ridiculous, but I agreed.

After an hour or two with my father, the guards called him over. He jumped up and sped over mid-conversation. He returned and sat down, telling me that I can take my cardigan off if I wanted to, and that they didn't realize I was visiting my father. As if that really made a difference? I kept it on.

What if I had been a mother? Or a girlfriend? Or a wife? I was uncomfortable. What was the point of ensuring that my forearms were covered and that I had a second layer over my back and shoulders? My father told me I was acting stubbornly, and that I need to learn to accept that that's how things are around here, and that they weren't going to change any time soon.

I feel more comfortable visiting now, knowing exactly what to expect. More importantly, my father is more comfortable where he is. He tells

me that at least. He has been in the same facility for about two and a half years, and the guards recognize me when I visit.

Over the past four years, I've hid my situation with my father from the majority of my peers. It's uncomfortable. And it shouldn't be. I've done nothing wrong, but people make postulations about what kind of person I am because of my father's situation. Thankfully, I have the opportunity each day to make first impressions based off of only me. Nevertheless, when people find out, it's awkward because you can tell that it's something "they would have never expected." They find me an anomaly, when really, there are plenty of people who have connections to the prison. It's hard for people who find out about my situation to look at me and not think, "Wait, but you're not like, a trashy person?" In fact, you'd be surprised how many times I've heard that comment.

It bothers me, sure, but I can't help people from forming their own ideologies. I understand that. These people have no power over me and according to the law and society, we are equal. When I visit my father—that disappears.

We're not "equal"—there. They have the power, and oftentimes use it, to degrade my family and me because of judgments they make. Our criminal justice system provides opportunities for its members to use their discretion; but the only reason that discretion is even "allowed" is because there's an unspoken understanding that those capable of using it will do so sparingly and with honor and justice in mind. I want to keep visiting my father, and if I want him to be as happy as he is capable of being there, I really can't stir the pot. I can't point out their indecencies, I can't defend my family and me, and I can't change anything, alone. I have too much to lose. Everyone in my situation does. So for now I suppose we'll just keep biting our tongues.