

VISITING DAY

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It seems as if time distends while you're waiting for something you want. On a Saturday morning while I am awaiting a visit from my wife, it's as if the very rotation of the planet has ground to a halt.

The wait actually begins on Friday at midnight. I work the graveyard shift so I am awake the entire night before the visit. I glance at the clock and figure I have between 9 and 10-and-a-half hours before I see her. So begins my weekly vigil.

With my wife there is a predictability to her demeanor at our visits. If she has had a bad week, which seems more often than not, she'll arrive late with a challenging attitude of Hey, you better not complain, mister. On the good weeks, she'll be early and friendly.

I am sure that being married to a man serving possibly the rest of his life behind bars must be a source of great stress for her. But I have been serving this sentence for as long as she has known me. Sometimes she acts like she just found this out yesterday. Believe me, I know that learning to accept a terrible reality is difficult, but I have not had the luxury of wondering about it. I have lived it.

I go to breakfast a bit groggy from the lack of sleep the night before, and hope the cop in the bubble that day will let me take a shower when he is finished feeding us. Luckily, this has been the case recently, but there were many times when I was forced to wash myself in the sink because they didn't want to run the showers in the morning. I suppose water is more expensive in the morning.

While I'm in the shower, I take a mental inventory of the past week's conversations and try to figure out if there have been any problems, any reasons for a delay or an angry visit. I wonder how she is, and if she is just then getting on the road from Los

Angeles and making her way up to the mountains.

During the week we speak at least once on the phone, and her responses are fairly good indicators of the tenor of the coming visit. "I'm having a good week" bodes well, but "I'm having a pretty good week" is tantamount to "I'm ready to jump off a bridge." Sometimes a "good" can change to a "pretty good" in three days, which leaves me wondering what happened, what the real source of the problem is, and of course the real problem is I am in prison. This is the one thing I cannot change.

"After all these years, I am still filled with a kind of giddy joy at seeing the woman I love."

I know I shouldn't, but I take all of this to heart. I have a tremendous fear of being abandoned, having been abandoned by my family and friends when I came to prison. My wife loves me, I know, but she hates my predicament. The hatred is growing while the love is merely holding its own.

Thoughts of this kind plague me most after I've showered and shaved and am ready for the visit. At this time, around 8:30 a.m., there is only an hour or two left to go. Most guys go to the yard when they are expecting a visit, more to be distracted than anything else. In the company of others, it is easier to feign indif-

ference.

Instead, I block my view of the clock to avoid checking the time with each new minute. I postpone dressing for as long as possible, saving this ritual as my final distraction. I have laid out my clothes earlier, and I put them on slowly.

At 9:30 I can feel the physical manifestations of stress growing more pronounced. My heart beats harder and more rapidly; I breathe quickly and shallowly and I begin to sweat.

By 10 o'clock, I have assumed the worst. My wife has been in an accident, she has got into a fight with the cops at the front gate, or (and this is the most painful to contemplate), she has finally succumbed to the hatred and anger and has once and for all abandoned me to this world. In these few hours I lose a measure of my humanity, and the toll is deeply felt. A man I knew who was serving a life sentence fell in love and he told me how he had never felt punished until then, until he embarked on this roller-coaster of heartache and joy that is the hallmark of prison love affairs.

Between 10:00 and 10:30 the cop in the bubble signals to me that I have a visit. The walk to the visiting room is always filled with a strange mixture of happiness and dread as I wonder what frame of mind she'll be in, what frame of mind I will find myself in. I am also, after all these years, filled with a kind of giddy joy at seeing the woman I love. I am glad I wait on Saturday mornings. I just wish I could be waiting in our bed for her to come back from the kitchen or the corner market.

Fantasies like this often emerge during visits. For a few brief hours, traces of the real world sneak in, accompanied by the smiles of women and the laughter of children.

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