

I get up at 4:30. My alarm is set for 5, but I can't sleep. If something happens and I don't make it by 9:15, they will close the yard for count and I will just be hanging around in the middle of nowhere til count clears. It has happened before. I just hate it. He is pacing in his cell and I am pacing the parking lot. Best to allow plenty of time for what usually takes three and a half hours. I slip out of bed so that I won't disturb my husband and creep down the stairs for a couple of cups of strong coffee. The dogs cuddle with me as I sip my coffee, check my bag of quarters, make sure I have his DOC number, my tag number (forgot last time and had to go back out to that steaming hot gravel parking lot to write it down on my palm since no pen or paper is allowed inside). I ponder what I will wear to visit my young friend Vet who is incarcerated at a medium security facility in the heartland. I'm 67 years old and my costume is not the first thing I think about when I get up in the mornings, but it is on Visitation Day. I try to avoid all hassles and all reasons to hold up the line: no zippers on my pants, shoes that are easy to slip off and have no buckles nor heels that might appear to conceal contraband, no underwire in my bra. No scooped necklines, no t-shirts announcing my liberal politics, no open-toed shoes or sandals, no cute little hat to camouflage the fact that I need a haircut. Some of the rules are written; some are not. I don't want to do anything that will hold up the line. We've all got to get in there before the yard closes. There's a time line in this strange place where men are doing time and time drags on and on. Face-to-face time is special and monitored and limited in prison.

I close the door quietly and slip out to my car, drive slowly down the gravel road as the sun comes up over the mountains and join hundreds of women all over the state on our way to visit our loved ones in prison in Oklahoma. Many of us have kids in our car, sleepy kids in car seats, grumpy teenagers slumped in the back seat with headphones on their nodding heads. These are our kids we are taking to see their daddies. Sometimes they are our grandchildren we are taking to visit their moms. There are lots of grandmothers my age raising their daughters' children and making the weekly, or sometimes monthly, trip to visit Mom.

I'm alone. No kids in my car. No brothers or sisters. I am not visiting a family member. I am visiting a friend, a former student, a young man I believe in and try to encourage. I met Vet when he enrolled in the speech class I taught at the minimum security facility where I have volunteered for nine years. I teach a Creative Writing class and a Conflict Resolution/Effective Communication class. He was shipped to another facility and now I send him books through Amazon and he reads them and then we discuss issues during our monthly visits. We pray, too. And hold hands, sometimes, and laugh and joke and sometimes cry. Well, I do. He would never let them see him cry. "Them" he defines differently depending on circumstances in this crazy subculture we call prison. "Them" can mean Corrections Officers, can mean other inmates, can mean the State, can mean a society that considers my young friend expendable: a young black man with faded gang tattoos on his body and a 20-year sentence stretching out in front of him into what feels like eternity.

I drive along and sing and pray and watch the dawn and marvel at how beautiful my state is. My part of the state in the southeastern corner in the mountains. By the time I get to the plains of north central Oklahoma, the sun will be well up and the early morning will be just as beautiful, though different, where the sky meets the grasslands stretching for miles in every direction. Why are most of Oklahoma's 23 prison facilities in rural areas? I actually enjoy the drive, but it is so hard on most families.

I head north and west, pushing the speed limit, just a bit, because, as I said, I have a deadline. As we, the families and friends, preachers and teachers, children and mamas, park our cars, grab our clear plastic bags of quarters and hurry to the gate, I look at us and marvel at how representative of America we are. We are black, white, American Indian, Latino, Asian. Some of the women are wearing the hi jab. Many are carrying single diapers and clear baby bottles with powdered formula that will be

inspected and then mixed with water so that Daddy can feed the baby. None of us have the ubiquitous purses that women carry as second nature. Of course not. Not in prison.

In one way, however, we do not represent society at large. As I look around, I realize that we are disproportionately female. There are men, of course, prison ministers, older fathers looking uncomfortable, teenage boys, shuffling along with low-slung pants barely scraping the sidewalk, hard-working men with farmer's tans and squinting eyes because they had to leave their John Deere caps in the truck. Yes, there are men making their way to the barbed wire fence, but mostly there are women. Women with babies, women whose "babies" will not be coming home with them tonight. Women all dressed up and looking as sexy as they can for their men. Women who can barely afford to make the trip. Women with heavy zip locks full of quarters because it takes a lot of quarters to feed a family from vending machines. We joke that there is more than one thief in this visiting room where a bag of chips costs 2 bucks and a stale sandwich will cost upwards of \$4. A little prison humor...

We are young, we are old, we are short, tall, thin, and not so thin. Some of us are comfortable; we do this every weekend and have for years. Some of us look tired, worn, and weary. Like the three women who drove to this small town from Indiana and found that their son/brother/boyfriend, who had just been "shipped to this yard" and was in prison for the first time, had not filled out the paperwork properly and their names were not on his approved list. I thought sure the mother, close to my age, was going to cry. The CO was competent, professional, and kind. She made a phone call and they were approved for a one-time first visit. I could have hugged that CO! But, of course, that kind of thing is not allowed. I did smile and compliment her. She smiled quietly back and kept the line moving. Remember: we have a deadline. Everybody she doesn't get through check-in will just hang around her waiting room til count clears because there is literally nowhere else to go.

Oklahomans often boast that we are the heartland of America, centered as we are in the middle of the nation. We claim to symbolize the very soul of our country in our dedication to family and hard work, patriotism, and Christian values. We represent American demographics: predominantly white, with a typical percentage of African Americans and Native Americans and a growing Hispanic population. We are educated, but not too educated. Protestant, Republican, working class.

I would say that we represent the heart of America in another way, too. A heart that is breaking. In a country that incarcerates a higher percentage of our citizens than any other nation on earth, Oklahoma incarcerates more women than any other state in the union and, therefore, the world. We are the second highest in incarcerating men. According to the US Bureau of Justice Statistics, we incarcerate 700 inmates per 100,000 population. The national rate is 471. Oklahoma's incarceration rate is 79% higher than the national average! Are we 79% meaner than everybody else? Or just 79% poorer and more addicted? I keep asking myself, why are so many of us in prison?

The failed war on drugs, poverty, failing schools, high rates of divorce and child abuse, teenage pregnancy, punitive long sentences that target minorities and poor people, a shrinking state budget that doesn't provide basic services to our citizens, DA's who stay in office because they are "tough on crime." I don't know that there is any one specific cause, but I do know that this means that hearts are breaking in the heartland.

Most of these people, particularly women, are in prison for nonviolent crimes, like writing hot checks, receiving stolen property, trying to pawn something that doesn't belong to her, and the ever-present scourge of people who live in poverty: drugs. Usually possession, sometimes intent to distribute. These women are not raising their children. Their mothers are. The fathers of their children are not visiting them on Saturdays. Their mothers are. Children in tow. The men in prison are not raising their

children either. Or paying child support. Or taxes.

I muse about this cycle of poverty and imprisonment and how ineffective it all is as I stand in line. The family in front of me is laughing and talking. Sometimes English. Sometimes Spanish. I gather that the tall handsome boys of the family haven't done this very often. One forgets his ID and has to run back to the car to get it. The matriarch scolds him for holding up the line. And smiles a weak apology at those of us behind her, glancing at the clock. It is inching towards 9.

The family in front of them is a single mom with four sons I see every month. Her stair-step boys giggle as they take off their shoes and prepare to walk through the full body scanner. They squirm as the CO uses the wand to "search" their little bodies. This pretty mom has her hands full. I remember last month when I shared the last of my quarters with her, I asked her husband when he is going to be released and admonished him to "get out, get straight, and help this lady raise these boys." Absolutely none of my business, of course. But you start to feel like a community when you are locked up together for several hours, rain or shine, visiting the men you love. She laughs and her pretty eyes sparkle as she watches her boys' daddy roughhouse with them. She is supposed to sit on her side of the table and he is supposed to sit on his side; however, the kids can run and play freely. So the three little boys crawl all over the daddy they resemble so closely while the sullen preteen sits by his mom, cutting his eyes around the room. I wonder as I watch him if he realizes he is in danger of becoming a statistic? Bi-racial son of an incarcerated parent living at or below the poverty line. I wonder if Mom knows...

That's one thing I was surprised about the first couple of visits: no one is yelling at their kids. No one is yelling at each other. No one is pouting. No one is scolding. Everybody is happy. The noise is

deafening. Laughter, card-playing, board games, flirting, praying, Bible reading. And I think about that every month: what if the rest of my state could see these families? Could see these men with their loved ones? They aren't monsters. They are men who made mistakes. Addicted men. They are men who tried to make an easy buck. They are men who got caught. They are men who should have been home with their wives and kids on the night they did whatever they did that landed them in prison. They didn't know that then; however, a lot of them do know it now.

Behind me in line is a lady about my age. Tight, lined face, freckled, blue-veined hands twisting her bag of quarters nervously. Her daughter-in-law whispers "I think you can go to the bathroom now. Don't wait. Because you will have to go back through the metal detector and we won't make it in time." Again, it is none of my business, but I turn to her and say, "Just ask the CO. She's real nice. Not all of them are, but she is." The lady's tired eyes peer into mine for just a short moment as she whispers, "They need to be nice to us. Some of us have never done this before." "I know," I whisper. "it is so hard." She looks at me again with such pain in her faded gray eyes and then she looks down at her shoes quickly. "Beyond hard," I say. "Excruciating." More to myself than to her.

We make it! Everybody in line fills out the roster, hands our car keys and IDs to the CO and gets a token with a number on it for retrieval at the end of the visit. We take off our shoes, empty our pockets, walk through the scanner, stand spread eagle for the wand and the officer's hand just making sure we aren't bringing in drugs or cell phones. We all get our shoes on and go through two locked doors in groups of no more than six and, finally, are in the Visitation Room before the yard closes for the morning count.

I have a wonderful visit with my young friend and after he has eaten his fill of "junk" from the vending machines, and after we have laughed and argued and discussed and prayed and I get ready to make my

way back to southeastern Oklahoma, we stand. I'm allowed to give him a hug as long as it doesn't last too long. I turn my back and go to the door which will have to be unlocked from the other side. I turn and blow him a kiss. I whisper a prayer that he will be safe again tonight. One thing I've learned since starting to work in prisons ten years ago is the true meaning of the motto "one day at a time." What did Vet tell me he used to pray when he was in solitary years ago? "Lord, don't let me go crazy this day. Lord, keep me sane this day." In prison, you can't look too far ahead. My friend taught me that.

He smiles, pats his hand on his chest, over his heart, turns and signs out. Without a backward glance, he goes back to his cell. Only five more years. If we're lucky.

As I turn in my token and get my key, a large lady with pale skin and pale eyes and a middle-school aged boy who looks just like her are standing in line for afternoon visitation. "Excuse me, ma'am," she says. "Do you think they will let me take my money in if I don't have a zip-lock bag?" She clutches two rolls of quarters which I know will not buy much in that vending hell. "I forgot my plastic bag." She attempts a chuckle. The boy looks away. "No," I say. "I don't think they will let you take them in like that. Here take my bag; I'm through with it for another month!" I, too, offer an awkward chuckle. I hand her the bag and she says "Oh, thank you. But take your quarters. I just need the bag." "Oh, keep 'em!" I say. "Not that many and you gotta feed a couple of growing boys!" Staring out the window, the boy blushes. Poor kid, I think. What a way to spend a Saturday afternoon. Her eyes fill with tears as she thanks me. She hugs me and I say, "Better hurry! You want to get in there before they close the yard for afternoon count!"

I go to my car, planning where I will stop to get something to eat that will taste better and cost less than what everybody else had for lunch. I laugh because Vet always accuses me of being "uppity" about food. I don't think he realizes that I want him to have all the Orange Crush and Skittles and stale pulled

pork sandwiches he can eat because it will be another month before he can "feast" again.

Everybody is walking slower as we make our ways back to the parking lot, sun starting its descent.

There was energy and anticipation this morning, but sadness and longing now. We are all leaving our hearts behind. Half of us is not going home tonight. Quiet voices drift away on the late afternoon breeze as each mother/wife/lover/friend gets in her car and heads home, leaving someone she loves behind locked gates and barbed wire. In the heartland...

-Liz Asken Beebeed  
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