

Report

# A Visit to Bluehaven Women's Correctional Facility On a Particularly Tepid Morning (19-02-23)

*November 22, 2023*

*by firzahapsari (Indonesia)*

---

PROMPT: Short Story Competition  
2023

---

☆ 3

GROUP: Write the World

"**Y**ou're still sniffing."

Mama sat behind the screen of scratched glass, one inch thick between us, while she absently picked at

her nails. The cold plastic of the telephone dug into my ear.

"Good morning to you too."

"You promised you'd stop."

"It's just the weather."

"Really, Ma?"

Her fingers paused their ticking destruction. "I said it's just the weather."

The words were a warning, a slap on the hand. I swallowed the sting with bitter ease.

"What about that educational program? You said you were going to join."

"It's gone."

I blinked. "What?"

"It's the feds. They don't want us criminals getting degrees." Mama pulled at her eyelashes. "They just finished

taking all the books out yesterday. Not that I can read 'em anyway."

Talks of defunding from the news I caught throughout the week crystallized sharply in my mind. Mama's nonchalance to it was another thing I had to swallow.

"Have you fixed Gina's teeth yet?" Mama's hoarse voice clawed through my thoughts. "Whatever the hell happened to her."

"She fell and knocked some out. And no, not yet."

"Were you not watching her?"

"I was, but I fell asleep. It was after—"

She clicked her tongue. "And Lucas? He's going to need new textbooks next month."

"I'm working on it."

"Did you take that test of yours already?"

"The GED?"

"Uh-huh."

"Not yet. It's \$169, Ma. And I haven't had the time to study enough."

"Why do you even work there anyway? Their pay isn't good and their uniform is ridiculous."

Suddenly, the red and orange polyester felt grating on my skin. I fought the urge to rip them off.

"They're the only ones that would take me, Ma."

"There have to be others."

"No, there isn't."

"You're lazy. You just haven't looked hard enough."

"I did."

"And what the hell did you do?"

"I applied to ten places and they all rejected me. All of them." Cold shivers rippled beneath my skin. "And I'm not going to be a plug. I know there's money there, but look where that got you."

By the time I realized what I had said, I knew I'd stepped on something tender. Mama fixed her eyes on me, molten hot on my skin.

She jabbed a peeling finger against the glass. "You have no right to judge me like that."

"Ma—"

"You think I had it better? I had to work too when the factory was shut down. Younger than you are."

I shut my eyes, severing Mama's voice from her body. I thought the blow would be easier if disembodied, coming from a faceless stranger rather than Mama.

"And when that wasn't enough, I had to find another way." A fierce hurt bled to

her words. "I only did it to put food on the table. I did it all for you and your siblings."

"Ma," I whispered. "I know."

"You say you know, but you still look at me like that." Her voice buckled. "Like I'm the bad guy."

Under the fluorescent lights, Mama's gaze thawed, glistening in the corners. I knew how to take pain, but I was never taught how to handle fragility. My eyes hovered to an unclear spot between us.

"My shift will start soon. I'll have to leave."

When she didn't answer, I looked down and rummaged through a plastic bag near my feet. "I brought you something. I got it from Auntie Angela. She said it used to be her son's."

I pulled out a battered hardcover children's book. "It's easy to read. And there's none of those bright colors. I know those hurt your eyes."

Mama's gaze flickered for a moment to the book. The already muted green was further faded with age. It depicted a boy with outstretched arms, waiting for an apple from a nearby tree to drop into his palms.

"I thought it'd help you with that program. I didn't know it'll get shut down."

Our eyes connected. I felt that same awkward sadness again. I shifted in my seat before bending down to return the book.

"Tell me when you finish it. I'll bring more for you. It'll do you good when you get out, Ma."

"It'll be a long time before that happens."

I paused, my hand still inside the plastic bag. "I know. Just hold on to it."

When I straightened, Mama's eyes had dried. She chewed on her fingernails absently, a vacantness settling in her eyes.

"The officer said it'll be delivered to you soon. They just need to get it through security first."

I watched her bite too close to her nail beds.

"Ma?"

"Hm?"

"You promise you'll read it?"

My voice turned clumsy, fumbling the sudden rising of hope.

"Yeah."

A shrill bell rang at the same time as relief flooded through me. Shrieks of chairs being pushed back filled the room. I heard shouts of orders and ushers from officers. I thought of heeding them before I paused.

"I love you, Ma. Happy birthday."



Mama looked at my face as if trying to decode my features. Then, a sad smile broke through her lips.

"I love you too, Dee."

The phone clicked on the receiver.

First Piece

Indonesia

Short Story