

A Mother's Love

I remember how hard it was. I remember how every hour seemed to bring me more pain than the last. I remember the nurse in pink scrubs attemptin' to stop my screams as Tomas was approachin', and when he finally came, she tried to stop my tears. When Tomas was in my arms, everything stopped for me. I couldn't breathe, or speak; I could only smile. So many people in the neighborhood kept tellin' me that this would be the easiest part of it all. I didn't believe 'em. I thought I had done it. I was a sarcastic, over-achievin' sixteen-year old who thought she had just won the lottery. Now I'm thirty-two, wonderin' if there is a time where this ever gets easier. I'm never one to back down from a challenge; I love challenges, always have. But this isn't a challenge. This is my heart bein' pulled from my body, breakin' my ribcage, but somehow I'm still alive, and breathin'. The worst thing about havin' your heart ripped out, is that no one is there to see it, but they are all around to watch the effects. They wanna see what it does to you, how it changes you, and they refuse to help or give you grace for the mistakes you make while trying to replace it, or get it back. I've made a whole lotta mistakes, but I never thought I would be punished for 'em. I thought God would look down on me, and recognize that I brought somethin' good into this world. That's what my Mom and her sistas told me, anyway. I've lost hope in God, because He gave up on me. I don't blame Him, though. I've been given' up on me.

I don't botha lookin' clean. The last time I visited Tomas, I was apparently "lookin' too good." Some of them chirped at me, and Tomas lowered his head. All he said was, "I'm gonna hear about this later." I knew what that meant, but I tried to pretend like I didn't. I don't like to think about him in there, in that place. No mother ever wants their kid to be in that place. Yet, here I am, actin' like this is a normal day. Lemme just brush my hair back into a bun, like I'm goin' to work. Lemme smooth over my shirt with my hands, like I gotta impress my boss.

Lemme put my shoes on, like I'm ready to seize the day. Lemme just pretend like I'm not about to hop in my car to go see my son, the farthest I've ever had to go.

I walk to the end of the block, feelin' the warm coolness of the air tickle my shoulders. There's a lightness to the breeze, and the way it sways around me. It almost lifts me up, makes me believe that things could be better. I see my car, and almost roll my eyes. This isn't a car, or it shouldn't be. The windows are broke, and they have cardboard taped on 'em, cause that looks appealin'. Forcin' myself into the car, I sink into the seat and lay my head on the wheel. I've stopped needin' the directions from my phone, but I put them on anyways. I need a voice other than the one in my head. I need somebody to tell me to drive, because everytime I visit Tomas, I consider makin' the wrong turn, or goin' back home. The worst part is, I don't even know if Tomas would care. Everytime I see him, he gets more used to it. That's when I remember why I come. I come to remind him of his home, of the people who love him, that he has people who love him. That place isn't his home. I am.

The drive goes by faster this time. It isn't long from Washington Heights, but sometimes it feels like hours and sometimes it feels like minutes. I know I'm close when I cross the bridge. I almost hold my breath. The ground shifts from smooth to rocky, and I can feel the tiny bumps the tires run over. I take a look to my left to see the cars leavin', their visit complete. I hope they got what they wanted. Each time I visit Tomas, I never know what I'm gonna get. I try to hope, but it gets lost. I can see the water from under the bridge. It's early so the current is soft, and the water flows lightly. I'm not superstitious, but for some reason, it makes me feel good. It could be a shitty day, but it isn't. Maybe somethin' good will come from today.

The arches of the bridge fade away, and then I see the fence. The barbed wire in circles on top of it. The building inside it. It seems crazy that in a few minutes, I'm gonna be in there. This is the part where I always forget. I always forget where I park or how I park. I always forget how I get outta my car and walk inside that building. I always forget how I get my visitor's pass. I lose all of that. The next thing I do remember, though, is sittin' on one side of the rectangular, gray metal table, waitin' for Tomas to enter. That's when it always dawns on me. I'm on Rikers Island. I'm visitin' my son in Rikers. I always wait five to ten minutes, each minute, my leg begins to shake with anxiousness. When will he come out?

I look down at my fingers, pickin' at 'em. I haven't cleaned my nails in a while. I should probably get on that. I'm usually good about takin' care of myself, but with Tomas, and gettin' the lawyer, and the bills stakin' up, I guess I've been-

“ Hey Ma,”

Immediately, my head snaps up, and I see him. Tomas. He gets closer, and I try to pretend that he doesn't have a dark blue jumpsuit on. I take a shaky breath, and my lips move into a smile, while my teeth grind against each other. Can teeth break?

“ Hey, baby,” I whisper. I look at him, all of him. His beautiful caramel face, his jet black hair, his pointy nose. When I look at his lips, I notice somethin' different. It's split. He has a cut on his lip. How the fuck does he have a cut on his lip? Who cut my son's lip?

“ Ma, relax. It's nothin'. I was handlin' business.” I look back into his eyes, and he nods his head towards my hands. I look at 'em, and release them from their fists. I stretch out my fingers, and take another breath. This is the hard part. Knowin' that he's gettin' hurt, but also knowin' there ain't nothin' I can do to help him, or to make it better.

“ You are sixteen, what *business* do you gotta handle?”

He shrugs. “ Should see the other guy. It’s cool. Sniper set him straight.” What the hell is he talkin’ about? Who is Sniper? What the hell is business? What is my son talkin’ about?

I shake my head. I gotta get to my point. “ Whatever, Tomas. Listen, your *Abuela* is helpin’ me pay for the lawyer. She couldn’t come today, but the lawyer said he could get you a deal. You a first time offender, or somethin’ like that, and he could get you probation, or community service and you can come back home.”

He leans back, unnerved. “ I’m good,” I freeze. I can’t move. What does he mean he’s good?

“ No, you’re not *good*, you in jail, Tomas. What you did was so bad, the state is tryna charge you as an adult, so I don’t care what you gotta do, but you are comin’ back to me, or I swear to God-”

“ I’m not a snitch, Ma. I’m not snitchin’ out Sniper so some trigger happy sirens-”

“ You are takin’ the deal!” I see faces snap towards me, and I look down at my hands. I must’ve shouted. I look back at Tomas, who looks smug. Sittin’ back, I try not to cry. I curse to myself. There’s only one person in the world who looks like Tomas, who could ever say those things, who could ever talk about snitchin’, and handlin’ business. Only one person who could get to him before me.

“ How did he get to you?” I ask, but my voice is hoarse, it hardly comes out. Tomas heard me, but he’s actin’ like he didn’t. He’s tryna stay strong, I can see it. He’s afraid, and I want to be the one to make the fear go away. But I can’t do it alone. He needs to help me.

“ I won’t say it again, Tomas.”

He rolls his eyes, and sighs. “ He’s lookin’ out for me, Ma. When I first got in, it was crazy, but then he told Sniper-”

“ You know what? I don’t wanna hear this. You’re talkin’ to that lawyer, you’re sayin’ whatever you need to say, and you’re comin’ home.”

“ I can’t do that, Ma. I can’t turn. Pops told me I can’t.”

I scoff to myself. I knew it. I knew his father got to him. Even from the beginnin’ this was my fear. I tried so hard to make sure this didn’t happen, but nothin’ I did worked. Tomas is more like him then he’ll ever know. I see his father in Tomas, and I feel like I’m havin’ deja vu, or somethin’. I place my head in my hands, and stay there for a minute or two. I need to be strong, but everytime I sit here, I get weaker.

“ Ma,” Tomas says. I look at him again, and I see a boy. My boy. The one I pushed out, and held in my arms. The one I wish I can still hold. He is my baby, and I will do whatever it takes to protect him.

“ You’re gonna meet this lawyer. You’re gonna do what he says, and you’re gonna get out, you hear me?”

“ But Pops-”

“ You let me worry about your father, alright? I got a bone to pick with him anyway,”

There’s a fire now. One I didn’t know I had. When Tomas first got arrested, I sank. My legs gave out, and it felt like all the air was vacuumed out of the room. My soul was taken, and I thought I could never get it back. But my soul’s sittin’ right in front of me now, and I won’t let him stay here. I know what I have to do. I have to go to hell to give Tomas a chance at heaven. There’s the voice in my head, tellin’ me there’s no hope, that this won’t work, but I shove it down deep. Y’all know me; I love a challenge.