

## When Are You Coming Back?

Amber Darkins

Well this is not a very familiar place. But I feel I have definitely been here before, or at least somewhere similar. My mother's small second hand, golden Mercedes pulls up to an institution that looks like it might split into jaws down its middle and swallow us whole. The monstrous structure's middle is marked by an American flag at full mast. We ride through the gates and suddenly we are inside with visitor tags on each of our shirts. My mother, brother and I are in a room with white brick walls and round edged, cream top tables. A man with deep, for lack of another word, chocolate skin and long full salt and pepper locs sits across from us. My extended family had always referred to me as their perfectly chocolate baby, just from looking at this man I knew who I got it from. He greets my brother and I with a smile and we commence the distant relative catchup slide. Questions about school and extracurriculars and friends and love interests droll out of his mouth, each answered, somehow my brother and I fill in the spaces. There is a break and I finally release my first question. "When are you coming back to be with us? Do you want to?" These were my earliest questions, I recall them first directed towards my mother at some small age. She answered, after a few repeats of the question, "You will have to ask him." Her response halted my questioning in its totality for some strange reason. Perhaps it was a feeling of defeat coupled with irritation I recall in her tone when Mommy spoke those words. I had just been examining a handmade card sent from my father, probably for a birthday. It was so beautiful to me. The front holding a hand drawn cartoon cat that gave me the warmest smile. All of the words were written in beautiful calligraphy. I wonder how much time it took him to make the card, it looked so carefully crafted. "It wasn't too much work, you two are worth a million times more. I should be doing more," the man replied in a strained expression. Did I ask out loud? I return to the card. On the right side of the card's inside, there is a photograph of my father that seems to be black and white, possibly because the printer was out of color ink. As I study the image his hues slowly grow richer, his locs, the depth of his gaze, all slowly become more lively. I try to imagine where he is and study the wall behind him. Wherever he is it does not look very homey, those odd brick walls look cold. I am so cold. I reach my hand out and run my fingers over the grooves in the blocks of the wall. My trance is broken with a low and apprehensive, "What father does not want to be with his children." He does not make eye contact with anyone but my mother for a moment that holds a little too long.

She has yet to actually say anything, besides hello. I constantly check on her expression but find myself with a multitude of possibilities of reasoning behind each slight expression. Mommy has never been shy of an expression, it is part of the reason she has to walk away from my grandparents whenever they try to dismiss her capabilities as an adult and mother.

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My tall Catholic kindergarten on a hill is adorned and almost hidden by trees. Hues of browns and greens and grays come together to paint this garden scene surrounding the few story building and the small church to its left. My class had just left the main school building in a line following our teachers.

“What does your dad do?” was the question bouncing around the group of children as we walked down the stone path side of this beautiful hill, towards the pass-through arch to go to the field behind the school building. Little voices said things like he works in an office or something important.

I interject with, “My dad is in jail.” I was met with a murmur, not much else, or maybe I can’t remember. I feel like I said something wrong, my stomach begins to sink and my ears grow hot. I did not think I was fibbing, but it felt like no one believed me. We continue our walk and I no longer want to speak. Why? The sun is graciously shining on the clearing behind our school and supposedly on my skin, but there is a heavy cloud following me. I told Mommy what I told them, at some point, I do not know how much time had passed but I was no longer going to my tall Catholic school on the hill. We were in her gold Mercedes once again, on some equally sunny day, maybe I asked if we ever visited my dad, or maybe just if she had any idea where he could have gone.

She said she never knew where he was or if he was even alive, to which I said, “I guess my memory of visiting him somewhere that looked like jail was just a very vivid dream. It was so vivid that I had convinced myself it was a memory when I was smaller. I was telling them white kids up on the Hill, my dad was in jail back in kindergarten!” I tried to laugh it off, but my stomach commenced the same sinking feeling and my ears became just as hot. I wished I could take back my words all over again. I left the conversation barely convinced my memory of visiting my father was nothing but a vivid dream, it felt so real. Why would Mommy lie? I also could not help but to think of many reasons why she would not want me to remember, or maybe did not want to remember herself. I returned to watching the clouds, over engaging in

conversation. The clouds were just as white and far and in between as they were in what I thought, or rather, knew was the first and last day we went to see him in that place. I remember there was daylight shining into the room we visited him in, not much, not nearly as much as the sun that shines on my skin today, or as we rode through the parking lot gates to visit, or during that walk with my kindergarten class.