

What I did on My Summer Vacation

When he starts his topic sentence, *This summer we went to visit my dad...* the boy stops, looks down at the paper, can't remember a darn thing then a picture of the waitress at the restaurant where they stopped for breakfast comes back—the funny way she wets the pencil with her lips before she writes their breakfast order. Suddenly, he hears his mom's voice: *Don't dare ask when we are going to get there!* But on this trip his mom lets him sit beside the window so he can see the sunrise. The bus ride across half of Pennsylvania is long but he doesn't mind. The motorcoach seats are big and stuffed like their living room chair and there is the hum of the wheels on the interstate as they travel and besides they stop to eat at that restaurant.

Later in the morning when they get there, his mom almost jumps off the bus, runs up the steps and pushes the door marked Visitor's Entrance. It won't budge. People from the bus pile up behind the two. "Push the button, lady!" There's a little metal box with the red button beside the door. Still, they wait. Inside the man with the grey shirt and black baseball cap doesn't seem to notice or hear. After many minutes, the door clicks. They go in, pass through the metal detector like in the movies. Mom signs a large book and the

crowd behind starts to do the same. The man in the grey shirt says, "Sit over there. When your man appears at the window (motioning across the large waiting room), go to that door on the opposite side of the room and push the button." Finally his dad does and they do. Of course they wait again. The boy is excited when the inner door slides away. The boy likes that. The next door doesn't have a button. His mom pushes and it swings open. The rows of stuffed chairs inside the visitor's room remind him of the movies, but the rows face each other. While they wait, the boy reads the signs posted on all four sides of the huge room--

ONE KISS ON GREETING AND UPON LEAVING

A QUICK EMBRACE

Anyone violating this will receive class 1 disciplinary action.

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Men come out. They are all dressed alike in brown clothes. His father comes out in the same brown PJ uniform with soft shoes like bedroom slippers. His mother explained that Dad was being a good guy, taking the blame for something his friends did. He won't be home to watch the boy's baseball ball games for awhile. The boy misses the way his father fills a room with his presence like his mom fills the living room with her perfume. His dad's smell, the way his face felt like sandpaper and the sinew and scars on his father's forearms: the boy tries not to think about it. But he likes that his dad sticks up for his friends. Dad hugs Mom and the boy notices the shirt has DOC on the back like the softball team he played for last summer in a "beer league" as his dad called it. He gives the boy a bigger hug lifting him off the ground. The boy doesn't ask his dad when he will be home. He has orders from mom about that question, too.

After a while, his mom and dad whisper to one another and he knows this is his sign to get lost! He wants to explore this place, anyway. There are a lot of other big and little kids here, too. He thinks about his friends and if they will make fun of him if he tells them about his dad and the visit to a place called SCI Rockview. The room is mostly glass and the men in grey shirts and black pants are the guards, but they don't have guns like he thought. Nevertheless the boy is glad the guards probably don't know he was sent to Sister Principal's office last year in fifth grade for giving his friend a noogie on the playground. He would never think of saying something untrue, but later on when he tells about his Rockview visit, he will give his guards guns. Besides, *who will know?*

The TV room has stuffed toys and picture books and little kids but there's nothing in there for him. Through the thick glass wall, he sees a play yard outside. The yard is long, narrow, surrounded by a chain-link fence and on the top, coils of razor wire. It reminds him of the picture above Sister Rose's desk in fifth grade showing Jesus crowned with thorns. He thinks it is beautiful. He will remember how the sun catches the many razor barbs and sparkles off of the stainless wire. Bigger boys play whiffle ball and at the other side are plastic slides and swings like at McDonald's and a green turtle with sand in it. What if the bigger boys get a foul tip outside the fence or in the nest of razor wire? He decides he doesn't want to go out and play with them.

His mother has brought a lot of dollar bills for lunch from the neon lit vending machines in the visitor's room-- she calls it the Merry-Go-Round of Death. His dad calls the prison dietary food, poison. Still, the boy has fun watching candy bars, pies and hamburgers spin, turn and fall down to an opening at the bottom of the machine.

When he and his mother leave the visitor's block, the summer sun is already behind the back of the guard tower. The boy and his mom will get home late at night, and he won't remember the sound of the interstate rolling under the wheels of the bus.

Now, his sixth grade teacher, Sister Mary Appassionata, has asked her new students to write an essay about their summer vacation. He licks the stub of his yellow lead pencil, laughs, and continues, *This summer I went to visit my dad at a place called Rockview.* He doesn't like writing essays very much, but Sister Mary App seems kind, her smile framed in white, the confident click of her rosary beads as she walks down the aisles of her new sixth grade writers.

When the class finishes writing, Sister will ask for volunteers to read, and his hand shoots up. What is he doing? Is he nuts! He hates to read in front of the class. After he reads and sits down, he doesn't know if Sister believes his story but she will remark, "Christopher, you're blessed with imagination. Your details and examples are so real. You are going to be one of our best writers." He's surprised and doesn't know if he likes that or not, but he likes Sister's attention and how the other boys will ask him questions on the playground at lunch. He does tell about the grey uniformed guard with guns. His friends think he's *bad*. And he notices Agnes Brickner, who everybody says is the smartest girl in the school, looks surprised at Sister's comment.

Walking past Gargotta's Groceries after school, he thinks of his essay and can't wait to tell his mom. He wonders if his dad will be proud of him for this story when he and Mom visit Rockview again at the end of September.