

An excerpt from *Limestone Wall* by Marlene Lee

On my first morning back in Jefferson City I sat on the edge of the motel bed, its sweaty, unfresh sheets knotted under me. A headache hung on. I felt feverish.

“Information,” I said into the telephone, wanting much more than the recorded message I received: prison visiting hours, 1:00 to 4:00. On voicemail I left my name, the prisoner’s name, and our relationship.

After coffee in the motel lobby, I called a cab. By noon I was standing in front of 712 Capitol. Energetic new demonstrators had replaced yesterday’s late crew. The police were changing shifts, too, and I watched fresh reinforcements file to the wall from patrol cars blocking off Cherry. Below the nearest manned tower, a line, mostly women, waited at the prison entrance notched into the wall. They looked experienced, knowledgeable about penitentiaries and themselves. Envyng them because they knew how to visit a prisoner, I got in line.

I looked west down Capitol Avenue where a new apartment building cast its out-of-scale presence over the neighborhood. In his letter, Steve had told me to expect the height, the glass and steel. He’d built it on the lot where his family’s home once stood. Still, I was surprised by its power and modernity. I spotted a pay phone near the double doors to the prison and considered calling him, but he would hear the singing and megaphone and guess where I was. Standing in line, even with my headache and fever, provided comfort: these women would not know me or judge me.

My old bedroom window across the street was blank. No curtain, no shade, just glass with a glint of sunlight. Downstairs, the lawyers had decorated. Painted shutters were pulled aside to frame flowers and figurines. Forty years ago my mother moved behind that glass, occasionally coming forward to adjust a drape or dust a sill. I longed for her to come to the window.

At one o'clock the prison doors opened and they let us in. After giving up my driver's license and being stamped on the back of the hand with purple ink, I took a seat in one of the orange plastic chairs that filled the waiting room. Two officers kept watch over us; there were approximately thirty of us there to visit. I'd traveled two days by train for this moment, but now I wanted to be somewhere else. My headache and flushed face occupied me. I hoped I was just overwrought, not sick and infecting the women who sat feeding their children, wrapping and rewrapping crying infants in blankets soiled from Department of Corrections buses the State ran on schedules from Kansas City, St. Louis, and Springfield.

I changed position on the molded chair. Next to me, a baby girl nursed. Her miniature gold-and-pink-gemmed earrings glittered with each pull at the breast. On her infant forehead, a sweat of salty dew had broken out. Exhausted by the hard work of feeding, her ecstatic eyes rolled up into her head.

I labored under the weight of dead air in the room. Drawing a deep breath required effort. My attention roamed among the women's sandals and toenails, the room's dirty windows, the pulse in my temple.

Was my mother being ushered toward me at this very moment? Did she dread seeing me? Would she even come? I tried to remember what she looked like and failed. I shouldn't have come back to Jefferson City. The few letters I'd written had never been answered. Maybe they'd never been delivered. Was I going to mention them to her? Should I? Does one talk about the mail to one's mother? Would she know me? Should I introduce myself? Would it be rude to ask her why she destroyed our family?