

A Father's Love

By

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Father's Day weekend in California State Prison is always one of the busiest visiting days of the year. For many prisoners it is the only day they get the opportunity to see their children. It is a reminder that despite their circumstance, no matter what they have done, they are loved. Father's Day at Corcoran is no exception. The visiting room is crowded with families, men in CDCR blues, children in the play area building squares out of Legos, tossing a ball back and forth. Two little boys wrestle. They bump into a small girl; she falls and begins to cry. Her mother quickly picks her up, consoling her. There is a low humming sound emitting from the ten-year-old air conditioner, pushing more warm air than cool. There is a mixed undertone of talking, laughing reconciliation and forgiveness. An officer sits behind the podium watching, his head on a swivel from left to right, then down at the video monitor. "*Safety and Security.*" The Correctional Officer mantra.

One man sits alone, waiting for his turn. He is older, late 50's, he looks every bit of 70. He's dressed in a white long sleeve button shirt, black cargo pants, and brown work boots. He is near sighted. His glasses wire framed. Nervously, he spins his wedding band between his left thumb and pinky finger. In his right hand, he massages a sobriety chip for comfort. His lips are dry. His once full head of black hair now thinning and grey. He glances up at the clock; a group of men marches into the visiting room; his heart beating faster now. He examines their faces, *it's not him; he's not coming out—coward.* He mumbles to himself.

A soda is placed in front of him. Cactus Cooler. *Here, this okay?* His wife sits down next to him. She is a small woman, greyish black hair pulled back from her face in a tight ponytail. She wears no makeup or jewelry, she doesn't need it. A hint of a small scar just below her lip. Chris was in her late 50's also. Dressed modestly in a black blouse, black pants, and black Chuck Taylor low-top tennis shoes. Her brown eyes were tired from the long drive. *Mitchell you hear me? You okay?* He takes a minute to respond, he was elsewhere in his thoughts. His wife made him come with her; this was her second time at this prison. "*We need healing, and forgiveness*". She said. He came for her, *because she asked.* She needed *healing, to forgive. I'm fine, what's taking so long? It's only been ten minutes. Please, don't do this, you promised me.* He cut her off. *Don't do what. Sit here like everything is okay. Pretend as if life is great Chris? It's not; it hasn't been for a while.*

She turns and faces forward, adjusting her ponytail, places both hands in her lap and examines her wedding ring. After a minute, she interlocks her fingers then turns back toward her husband. *I think that after we leave here, maybe we can go to that restaurant you like on the Promenade. You remember, don't you Mitchell, the one where we sat outside with the little lights in the trees? You really like that place, remember?* He knew he upset his wife. He regrets opening his mouth. *I think they close at nine,* he says. *We could stop by; it's been a while since we've been there.* She pats his knee, squeezes his hand, leaves her fingers in his palm and leans in close enough that her nose brushes up against his chin. He inhales deeply taking her in, before lowering his head for her.

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Mitchell sat alone at the kitchen table, nursing his third glass of *Neupera*, a cheap wine; given to him by his colleagues as a joke after a slip and fall. He didn't see the wet floor sign and spent a week on his back. The wine came with a card *Take Care of You.* As a rule, Mitchell didn't drink cheap wine he called it *bad influences.* "*It taste good going down, but you always pay the consequences later*"; he would say. Tonight was the exception; he was tired and frustrated. It was late.... his son was late again. The front door rattled, creaked open, and closed. Mitchell rose to his feet. Mitchell Jr. stood in the foyer, struggling to maintain his balance. He was drunk, *blitzed,* swaying; clothes wrinkled, untucked and sloppy. He tried to walk past his father, toward his room. Bad idea. *Where have you been?* Slurring *Wet--my friens at,* Mitchell cut him off. *Are you crazy? Coming home late, drunk.* His father grabbed his arm to steady him. He leaned almost fell. His grip tightening. *Dad lemme go... I wanna go lay down.* He could smell the booze coming from his son. His own cheap wine influencing his anger and frustration. The resentment rising between them. He snatched his arm from his father. *Stop It. Mitchell.* Chris's voice was half shriek, half begging. It was too late. He hit his son in the mouth. He fell hard laying still for what seemed like an hour before pulling himself to his knees, his mouth bleeding. His mother stood in front of his

father holding him around the waist, keeping him from hurting her son. Her baby. *No Mitchell stop, please. Let him go to his room.* His eyes wide with fear and shock, tears forming. He let out a sound from deep inside his body, a low moan like a wounded animal, *mooom?* Helpless she stood there holding her husband. *Go to your room, I'm coming--Go.* He stood wobbled, fell into the table, grabs the bottle of *Neupera*, the car keys and staggered out the door. *Let him leave Chris.* Mitchell said. *Just let him go.*

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Mitchell Jr. flew through the intersection at Haster and Chapman with the headlights off and windows down. His foot pressing harder on the accelerator of his father's Lincoln swerving and reaching speeds of 80 miles per hour. *Faster.* He thought...*Faster.* Head pounding and mouth stinging from his father's punch, he blew past the Crystal Cathedral replaying the fight they just had. Resentment growing, remembering all the times he witnessed his father passed out drunk, *and now he hits Me! Because I had a few drinks!* He was outraged. Fighting back his tears and feeling betrayed by his mother, *She chose his side, after all the times I helped her clean him up and listened to her cry because of him.* He was hurt feeling sorry for himself, he turned the music up louder trying to drown out his own thoughts. He raises the *Neupera* up to his mouth closing his eyes; *"it taste good going down, but you always pay the consequences later"*. He loosens his grip on the steering wheel and the Lincoln veered hard to the right at the exact moment a homeless man steps off the curb and into the street pulling his shopping cart behind him. Mitchell Jr. never knew he hit him. He kept driving.

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The next group of men files into the visiting room. This was the first time he had seen his parents together in over ten years. The last time he had seen his father, was at his vehicular manslaughter trial. Since then, his father refused to speak to him when he called home. He wouldn't respond to his letters or see him. He notices them immediately, sitting closely, his mother's head under his father's chin, her eyes closed. He studied them for a minute longer before checking in at the podium with the officer. He walks towards them slowly; oblivious to everything and everyone else in the room. They didn't look up until he was standing right in front of them. Chris notices him first, she stands, wrapping her arms around him, kissing him on the cheek, and then steps back to examine him. *You look thin, have you been eating?* He keeps quiet, his eyes focused on his father. *I eat too much.* He says with a smile. *I want to feed you, Let me get you something from the vending machine,* .She says with a hint of nervousness then quickly heads toward the machine.

He was the younger version of his father: same six five frame, same light blue eyes, same stubbornness, and inability to deny his mother's request. His father didn't move or acknowledge his son, he sat there—stoic starring at the table. His mother pushed him forward her arms full with candy and bags of Lays chips. *Hi Dad* He doesn't move. *Dad...So you just came all the way out here to ignore me?* He sits down next to him. His father didn't take his eyes off the table. His knees pointed at his father now, looking at the side of his face....*Dad. I'm getting out soon.* He begins nervously. *They took some time off my sentence. I've been taking these courses that...* He let his voice trail off then looked over at his mother for assurance. She motions with her eyes to keep going---keep talking. *Help me—to. These courses helped me change. I'm not the same person. I don't drink anymore.* His father nods his head slightly acknowledging his son. He kept his focus on the table. Mitchell Jr. looks down at his feet, and then picks up a bag of chips turning it over in his hand reading over the ingredients before he sets it down. He starts again, *"Dad"*, his father stiffens when he feels his son's hand on his shoulder. He closes his eyes. It had been a long time since he felt his son's touch. His hand begins to tremble; he clutches his fist tighter now. Mitchell Jr. starts up again his voice softer, less nervous. *Dad, I know you're still mad at me, I get it. I deserve it. I messed up.* He leans in close to his father's ear, voice breaking a bit, filling with emotion. *Dad?... I'm sorry. I messed up.*

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Even in recovery, Mitchell couldn't bring himself to face his son. Deep down inside he knew that he was the cause for him being in prison, for running down an innocent man. He chose not to acknowledge it. It was easier that way. Acknowledgement meant he had to take responsibility for his choices and the effect he had on his family. Mitchell was an alcoholic—had been for years. Everyone knew it. He wouldn't admit that either not even to himself. He gave his son his first drink. *A father son bonding* over a bottle of Peppermint Schnapps. He didn't see anything wrong with it. *A tradition.* He rationalized. He sat there listening to his son remembering that first

drink. “Don’t tell your mother son and never drink cheap wine, you always pay the consequences later.” His fatherly advice. Now here he is paying the consequences, his son in prison for killing someone and pleading with him for forgiveness. *I’m a fool.* Mitchell thought to himself. The regret and remorse building inside of him fighting to get out. He licks his lips, they were dry. His clenched hands, clammy, clutching tightly to his sobriety chip. *I’m a fool.* He thinks again shaking his head. *Dad? Say something. Please.* Mitchell broke.

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He turns to his son, eyes wet and strained. He grabs Mitchell Jr. pulling him closer to him, body shaking with emotion, sobbing. He finally spoke. *I know you are son. It’s my fault, it’s mine. I messed up son, it’s my fault.* He held him for a long time before pulling away. Mitchell looked over at his wife. Chris held her hands over her mouth covering her smile, her fingertips just below her eyes. She was speechless, overcome with joy, tears forming at the corners of her eyes, **Finally** she thought, *Finally.*

Mitchell places his hand on his sons forearm. *I don’t drink anymore either son. Maybe when you come home we can go to a meeting together. Maybe help each other out.* Mitchell Jr. smiles,. *That sounds like a good idea Dad. I would like that.*

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