Tip Jar Girl

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If you walk into Frozen Planet, a frozen yogurt shop in South Brooklyn, you’re likely to see a four-foot-ten young woman who walks with impressively great posture and her head held high. Her pretty, pin-straight brown hair and thin face draw you in. If you get yogurt, she’ll probably smile at you, ask you how your day is going, or maybe she’ll compliment your hair. After just a few seconds of conversation, you may be tempted to
and she then proceeds to press “1” where she is finally greeted by her father’s scratchy, low-pitched voice.

Only eighteen, Cassidy has lived without her dad for fifteen years, during which she has dealt with harsh criticism. Second grade was when she started to realize that her father was in prison. Her mother bought her a book called My Dad is in Jail, but there was one problem: Cassidy hated the word “jail.” Her mom decided that she’d replace the word “jail” with “a facility,” revising her book title to My Dad is in a Facility. The first time she felt the grief of having her father away was also in the second grade. She and her best friend at the time had gotten into a dispute over something she cannot remember. “This girl and I were very close. She and her mother came over for Sunday dinner all the time, but sometimes we argued,” Cassidy said. She felt her face become warm and red, and her heart drop when she heard her small brunette friend say, “Well, that’s why I have a dad and you don’t.” Though naturally loquacious, she had nothing to say to that statement. Intense confusion consumed her. She did have a father. She spoke to him every day and saw him once a month—in prison.

In middle school, she faced a lot of aggression from the staff. The teachers and the higher-ups expected less of her and associated anything she did wrong with her father being away. “Because they knew where my father was,” she explained, “it already set the stage for my attitude, or whenever I got into trouble, it was like, ‘Oh, well, she’s acting out. That’s all she knows.’” In one instance, she recalls a time when she yelled at another girl in her grade who was antagonizing her. She was reprimanded by
the assistant principal who looked down on her while saying, “This is school, get rid of this mob mentality of yours.” Tears immediately rushed down Cassidy’s face. Children of incarcerated parents often face isolation because of this stigma. Our society tends to dehumanize prisoners and frowns upon their family members.

These experiences made Cassidy enter a “dark time,” from the age of thirteen to sixteen. She spent a lot of time alone because her mother worked a lot (and still does). “I wouldn’t even do my homework because I wasn’t very motivated to do it. I would sit there and dwell on the fact that I wasn’t doing my homework, and dwell on the fact that I was so sad, and dwell on the fact that I didn’t have a dad, just dwell on the fact that I was just alone in my thoughts all the time,” she explained, choking up.

During this time, her father was transferred to a prison in South Carolina, making her visits less frequent. According to the U.S. Department of Justice National Institute of Corrections, most facilities have the power to transfer their inmates to other locations and will occasionally make use of it. As a result, families like Cassidy’s often suffer. Transfers occur due to overcrowdedness and for inmate protection. Cassidy and her mother found themselves on flights to South Carolina every six months. He returned to the Danbury Correctional Center after two years.

The stigma that Cassidy endured made her more cautious in who she told about her father. She explained, “That’s never the first thing [I] would say to a person, like ‘Hey, my dad’s in federal prison for twenty-seven years.’ You kind of have to feel out the person first.” She knows the judgment that follows after telling people, but as she’s gotten older, she has become more open about it because it’s such an important part of her life and who she is. Nonetheless, she shrugged when saying, “My dad’s my hero, which is kind of ironic because when you think about it, my hero is a prisoner, so what does that really say about me?”

She has spent a five-hour period every month visiting her father. Cassidy explains that she maintains a sense of courtesy around other prisoners while acknowledging that there is an unspoken tension in her thoughts of what did he do to be here? “Even though there is a prisoner of some sort next to me, I’ll still say excuse me, or say hello to them, or ask them if they wanna sit in my seat,” she says. She developed the ability to see past the image American citizens often have when someone thinks of a prisoner.

Her face became serious when we spoke about inmates and convicted felons not having the right to vote. “That’s something that I really thought about this year, especially with the election that just passed.” According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, there are two states in America that allow their incarcerated population to vote. Two out of fifty, which are Maine and Vermont. The rest of the state’s inmates receive a “civil death” and too often, it is extremely difficult to register to vote once labeled a felon, even after a completed sentence. Cassidy feels extremely frustrated by this. “My dad has so many opinions and just because he did something wrong doesn’t mean that his opinions aren’t valid... I feel like
people won’t give that population the time of day,” she said, annoyed.

Her mother was a big help in molding the relationship between Cassidy and her father, and she was there to keep Cassidy busy from the absence of her father even though she was dealing with the absence of her husband. “She’s the glue that holds my dad and [me] together, because without her, I wouldn’t have [had] a relationship with him. Without her, I wouldn’t go see him. The way I feel is because my mom has helped me feel that way. She has almost forced me to go see him and sit next to him, talk to him, and answer his phone calls.”

Cassidy’s parents officially divorced when she was nine, and although her mom dated, she never remarried. “Now, she’s not dating anymore, and they’re closer than they’ve ever been. They’re in love and there’s nothing that can get between that, even if it’s a matter of him being imprisoned. That’s their relationship,” she explained. When they visit, Cassidy sees the affection between her parents: her mom beside her father, their hands crossed together, while her mom stares at him with big starry eyes as he speaks. She lays her head on his shoulder and a smile persists. Cassidy laughs when she says, “It’s like they are teenagers, that’s the only time I’ve seen my mom act that way.”

Now at eighteen, Cassidy has a boyfriend of two years, Frankie, who has yet to meet her father. She says, “I’m kind of nervous for them to meet so I’ve held it off, and I probably will for another year or two. Frankie doesn’t know that, but I do.” When she brought him home, she realized that her father’s absence was talked about more than ever before. Her uncle, who lives two floors above her, approached Frankie with his chest held high, as if to intimidate her boyfriend and make it ever so clear that he did not approve of him—and this was prior to knowing anything about him. After several months of teasing and constantly excluding him, Cassidy had had enough. All four-foot-ten of her made her way to her uncle to figure out why he was being so unfair to her boyfriend. He explained that he was just looking out for her, taking the place of her father and that her father would do the same “if he were home.” She smiled while analyzing the words and replied, “But I don’t think that’s how my dad would act if he were home.”

Cassidy’s father does become a bit taciturn whenever she mentions Frankie, which is unlike him. Her brown eyes brightened when she said, “I feel like he gets kind of jealous, like really overprotective, and I kind of like that.” Cassidy, her mother, and her boyfriend do everything together. He helps out as much as possible, pumping the gas and even changing tires when needed.

Cassidy currently attends a local community college and works at a frozen yogurt shop. For the first time, Cassidy feels the drive to do well in school. She is maintaining all As. She realized that working at the yogurt shop has inspired her to pursue a career in sales. There is nothing that is more exciting than her tip jar. With her witty remarks and smiles, she is thrilled when her small talk is the reason for a tip. “I’m on top of my game, doing what I’m supposed to do.”