

# RESPONSE

## Time Spent Doing Time

*Susan Nagelsen*

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I am waiting once again for visits to begin; this is my eleven hundred fiftieth in a series of visits that spans the last eleven years. I have watched a parade of humanity pass before my eyes. In many ways it has been akin to watching a full-length feature film, a saga if you will. Today is a typical day. It is Sunday, and it is 12:00, but I am sitting in the cold, orange, plastic chair even though I will not be admitted into the visiting room until 1:00. There is a ritual that must be followed, especially on Sundays. If you are not early, very early, you will not get in until the allotted time is half gone. On Sundays the room is filled to capacity, which translates into about two hundred people of all colors, shapes, sizes, and ages; most are from disadvantaged backgrounds, but as always there are people who represent both ends of the spectrum and all points in between. You can be guaranteed of two things: it will be loud and it never lacks for interest.

The eighties brought truth-in-sentencing, which brought mandatory sentences, accompanied by lengthy minimum sentences; consequently, the same people make the trek to the visiting room, and I have come to know them for that hour spent each Sunday waiting, passing time. I notice when someone isn't there, I listen to conversations, I learn about their lives and their children. I have seen them at their best and their worst, and they have shared with infinite patience and obvious understanding when I was at my best and at my worst. When tragedy strikes, there are hugs and tears and nods of understanding.

So, here I sit. It is January and the temperature is hovering around zero. The door opens, and I hear the woman next to me say, "Oh look, she had her baby." Karen has been visiting her husband here for five years, and we have sat together and talked through more Sundays than either of us wants to remember. Karen loves babies. Her son started visiting his father when he was just an eleven-year-old boy, and is now nineteen and at least six foot three. But through the years, we have heard about his struggles in school, his first date, his first car accident, and the protective nature of this boy-man as he tries to take care of his mother. While Karen is making noises about the baby, I can't help but think about how much her son has changed over the years.

I can remember the years of sitting there on a Sunday when Karen would bring her son along for a visit. In the beginning, they would sit apart from the group, for he was shy and this was new for him. As the years went along, he gained confidence and began to interact, at first just here and there, but now, oh what a difference.

All these years later, when this young man comes in for a visit, he is able to give as good as he gets. He has a great smile, and when he flashes that smile, his eyes light up, and in that moment we are all uplifted by his joy.

Karen's voice draws my attention, and I turn in my seat to see a young woman who is probably about twenty. She has barely made it through the door when three women, with oohs and ahs about the baby, a little girl named Tamatha, surround her. She is a little doll, and her mother is clearly very proud. The women help her with the baby seat, her diaper bag, and before too long, she is settled next to them with the baby, a blanket, a bottle, and a handkerchief filled with quarters. This baby is the newest addition to this collective.

These mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, lovers, friends, and children are doing time with the men they visit. When the clock finally ticks off the final seconds and the guards begin to call for visits, there is a collective sigh in the room. The cacophony begins in earnest. You can hear lockers slamming, quarters dropping, feet shuffling, and the children's voices are raised another octave, fighting to be heard.

There is one little voice that seems to be higher than the rest, "I want to see my abuelo," screams Mariel. The room is immediately silent. Then the smiles, then the voices begin. We have been waiting for her to speak for the longest time. She has been coming to this visiting room since before she was born, and we have watched her grow. We watched as her grandmother first carried her in her arms, and then came the stroller, and then the first tentative steps. Mariel went through the typical stages. At first, she would let anyone hold her, but at about eleven months, she only wanted her abuela. At two, she scowls at strangers, her eyebrows meeting in the middle; on some days, she slowly and cautiously warms up to the room filled with strangers.

We are laughing and smiling and talking. We are clapping and doing the "Isn't she the cutest thing" between ourselves. Her grandmother, a beautiful woman, with smooth café lechè skin and an engaging smile is clearly tickled to hear her granddaughter. It is a happy moment in a difficult place.

I hear my name called, and I head toward the bubble. Behind me I hear familiar voices speaking the mantra, "Have a good visit; see you next week." I walk toward the metal detector, stick my hand through the Plexiglas hole so the guard can stamp it. Then I wait for the door to the mantrap to buzz, and I walk to the front bubble.

"Hey, how ya doin today?" His voice is gravelly from smoking too many cigarettes. He is one of the guards who holds up the start of visits because he has to go have one last smoke before he is trapped in the bubble for the next three hours. I don't mind it when he is in the bubble; he doesn't care about anything. I smile to myself because it means it will be a low-key kind of visit.

"I'm hanging in there. Could I please have a table on the wall?"

I wait to see if my request will be granted. He will usually comply. You learn quickly who will and who won't.

"Table twenty-four," he says.

I smile my thanks and the door buzzes. This is great. I like this table. It is by a window; although the view is a cinder block courtyard filled with pigeons and rows of concertina and razor wire, there is natural light. I stand at the table and survey the room while I wait for my husband to walk through the door. I especially like this table because it is situated about half way between the front door and the door to the yard, up against the wall. We are offered, as a result of our fortunate table assignment, a panoramic view of the people whose lives are tangential to mine.

I look to see who is sitting on either side of us; it is an important thing to note. There are times when tempers flare, when private business becomes public business, and as anyone will tell you, forewarned is forearmed. The door from the yard opens, and men come through one after the other. I see many of the same men walk through the door each Sunday; they begin as a staggered column and fan out toward their visits. Some might nod as they walk by, and I find that I notice if someone isn't looking well, or if someone is not in the usual crowd.

My husband is third through the door, and he drops his pass in the specified place and strides toward me. His smile is there from the moment we make eye contact. His first question is always the same, "How are you?" Then we hug.

Once we are seated at the table, we begin to catch up. We never play cards, we never play games; we talk. We sometimes marvel at the people

who come in to the visiting room and barely acknowledge one another before they begin to play cards or Yahtzee and eat.

We spend time talking about my world, and then we spend time talking about his world, not the nature of prison, but the humans that occupy the space within the walls. So today he says, "You should see Felix; I have no idea when he will make it over here. The last time I saw him was when they cleared count, and he was still in his towel, primping in the bathroom. He is trying to make those gray hairs less visible."

"Have you seen his wife today?"

He scanned the room until his gaze stopped on Felix's wife. She is sitting at a table near the play area watching Mariel play in the play area. She has on a black winter skirt that comes to mid-calf. It has beautiful lines. Her boots are black calfskin and stop just below her knee. Her sweater is red and it hugs her body. She looks elegant, sitting there her hands clasped on the table in front of her, her legs crossed at the ankles.

"No wonder he works so hard. He must be scared to death that he might lose her. It's only been five, and he's got fifteen on the bottom."

"Check out Mariel over there in the play area."

"You've got to be kidding me," my husband says, shaking his head as he speaks.

"She is really turning into a little person."

Our conversation seems to go like that for a while. These people's lives intersect ours, so when things happen, we share them just as anyone would. One Sunday afternoon a couple of years ago, I noticed that a woman and her two kids weren't visiting that afternoon. When my husband sat down, I asked him about Tom. He shook his head.

"He died yesterday evening. I didn't even hear about it until this morning."

I wasn't surprised; it wasn't unexpected, but I felt a wide range of emotions surge through me. How sad. How sad that he died in prison. How sad that he couldn't be with his family. How sad for his children, and yet, how liberating for all of them. In many ways, he gave them the ultimate gift; they were all set free.

We had watched his decline. At first it was just little things; he started carrying a pillow to sit on; he had lost a lot of weight, and the chairs were hard on his back. His children, ages five and seven, then six and eight, then seven and nine, and finally nine and eleven, visited their father twice a week for as long as they could. When they were young, Tom was able to

lift them in the air and play with them. It was nice to see them happy. As his health failed they found more sedentary ways to enjoy one another. The children were at an age where they could understand the need for more contemplative time. They shared a faith that was strong, and at the end of each visit they would hold hands and pray, until finally it would be time for them to go. I had seen them just the week before, sitting there across the room. Tom looked very bad, but he smiled, and the kids gave him and his wife some time alone.

“Those kids really grew up fast, didn’t they? It will be odd not to see them here anymore.”

“I can only imagine how they must be feeling.”

We sat there in companionable silence for a bit, and then the sound of a crying infant entered the space.

“That must be Tamatha; she is only eight days old. You should see her, she is so tiny.” I knew that I was smiling from ear to ear. “There is something so sweet about newborn babies.”

The crying stopped as the new family made its way across the room; they were going to have pictures taken, the proud father stopping along the way to show off his baby girl. As they passed, I said to my husband, “Do you know him?”

“He’s been in the unit for a couple of months, but he isn’t doing much, maybe three, three and a half.”

They position themselves along the wall as their smiles are recorded for posterity, and then they make their way back to their assigned table.

On Sundays there is a steady stream of people moving up and back between the vending machine and the table, or from the table to the door. There is the constant sound of quarters dropping into slots and drink cans dropping with a thud at the bottom of the chute in the vending machine, and the buzzing of the door and the crackle of the guards’ radios, and all of this is competing with the sounds of laughter and anger and tears and joy. There are people who are only able to visit once a month, and when they show up it is like watching a series of mini-reunions as they make their way to a table in the back of the room. They nod to some and stop to shake hands and chat with others.

The door buzzes and pops indicating someone coming in the room. I recognize the woman, and even though I haven’t seen her for a while, she looks basically the same. There may be a few more gray hairs, or some extra pounds, but I would know her anywhere. I don’t recognize the young

woman walking with her. They head down the aisle and begin searching for the table. I can hear them saying to one another, "Table fifty-three," as if speaking it aloud will help them locate it. The young woman is much closer now, and I am shocked. This young woman is the daughter. The changes are amazing. She has gone from little girl to young woman. I don't know the woman well, only to nod and say hello, but I have heard her speaking to other women, so I know that her daughter is very busy with cheerleading, clubs, school, and she is a full-blown teenager who cannot be bothered with spending time with the family. She has gone the way of all teenagers, as she should. She visits maybe once every couple of months. I don't think I have seen her for nearly six months. I am absolutely amazed.

I can't help but think about the changes that happen while these husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters are locked behind bars. Of course we age; there is no doubt about it, but it isn't so clear to us. We are living it, and we are thankfully unable to clearly remember what it was like to bound out of bed after a couple of hours of sleep ready to face the day without a single ache. Our changes become invisible to us. Watching the children make their appearance as brand new tiny babies and realizing that in the blink of an eye you are staring into the eyes of a defiant fourteen year old is something to behold. It is in that moment that you realize just how quickly life changes.

It becomes a tableau. The world stops for just a moment, and I am allowed a moment to see it all unfold before me. I notice lines on faces, a slowness to a once jaunty gait, less hair on the heads, more hair on the ears, hands that shake and ears that strain to hear; there are babies crying, teenage girls sitting with their arms crossed and backs turned. A group of boys, ranging in age from four to six play with trucks on the floor. I hear a small boy yelling at the top of his lungs, "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!" He is running full tilt toward a man who smiles from ear to ear as he opens his arms wide. He stoops and the boy leaps into his father's arms. All of these images and sounds present themselves for what they are: the texture of time spent doing time.

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