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From the Los Angeles Times

15-Year-Old Gets to Be a Daughter for a While

Her mom's in prison for life, so a program that arranges Mother's Day visits offers a rare treat.

By Erika Hayasaki

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Miya Chatman leans against the kitchen counter on Thursday evening, as her grandmother brews a pot of tea. The 15-year-old is trying to decide what to wear when she visits her mother in prison.

"Why don't you wear your white jacket?" asks her grandmother, Karen Hawkins, 59. "It's so pretty."

"No, Granny," Miya groans. "I wore that last time."

Miya's eyes sweep across her grandmother's Westchester apartment, where she lives with her older brother. Decorated with cow wallpaper, handmade quilts and a fern, the place seems to represent everything Miya is rebelling against.

The next day will be important. Along with 600 other children from across California, Miya will participate in the "Get on the Bus" program, started by ministers in 1999 to reunite children and families with their incarcerated moms for Mother's Day.

In the kitchen, her grandmother looks at Miya's earrings: two thick gold hearts, big as bracelets. She disapproves of them, even though they're Miya's favorite pair. Hawkins reminds her granddaughter that the prison has strict rules about jewelry.

"You can't wear your earrings," she says.

Miya replies: "I know."

Even though her mom has been locked up in a prison 300 miles away for the last 12 years, Miya believes she understands her more than her grandmother ever will.

Hawkins has taken Miya to see her mother off and on since she was 3. Her mom is serving a life sentence for kidnapping, robbery and weapons possession. Miya's earliest memory of her, when she was about 3 or 4, is from inside prison. Visiting hours had ended. Guards warned families to hold the children so they wouldn't chase their mothers. Miya didn't understand.

"Can my mommy go with me?" Miya asked.

"No," her grandmother replied.

Miya reached for her mother's hand. She screamed as her grandmother pulled her tiny fingers away.

Miya threw up all the way home.

This time will be different. When it comes to prison visits these days, Miya is an old hand. Her grandmother won't be there. Miya will have her mom's full attention.

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A List of Rules

From the bus, Miya can see the sun rising. Valley State Prison for Women in Chowchilla is 4 1/2 hours away. Miya can't eat or sleep. She flips through Seventeen magazine but can't concentrate. She smooths the flowing pink skirt and matching sparkly top her grandma bought her for Easter. She has matching high heels, but she traded those for sneakers today because of prison rules.

Last week, All Saints' Beverly Hills, the Episcopal church that is sponsoring Miya's bus, sent a list of prison visiting rules. Don't wear red or blue, known gang colors. No jeans, zippers, cellphones, underwire bras or jewelry.

Miya followed the rules, except for one: She is wearing her favorite earrings.

From her window seat, she talks about how much she hates school. She has been kicked out of three schools for fighting. Now, she attends Orville Wright Middle School in L.A.'s Westchester community. Miya says she plans to earn an equivalency diploma by age 16 and get a job. She talks about other schools where kids do drugs in classrooms. Miya's biggest problem is staying out too late.

"I always tell my granny, 'I ain't even half as bad as you think I am.' "

Her grandmother is white. Miya's mother is white and her father is black. Miya says her mom grew up "in da hood" and, therefore, "everything I'm going through, she's been through." Her dad lives in Detroit and is not involved in her life.

Miya borrows a boy's MP3 player. Nodding her head, she takes out a pen and a notebook and begins to write rap lyrics:

spitting on wax from day to day

counting my stacks and getting paid

yeah, we sooowooping all the time

the ... in my hood say I'm a dime.

Just after 10 a.m., Miya takes off her sunglasses, revealing curly eyelashes. She looks out the window and sees rows of avocado trees and a sign that reads: "Valley State Prison." Miya pulls a brush out of her Tinkerbell bag and runs it through her hair.

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'You Know Better'

"Does anybody have anything bigger than one-dollar bills or quarters? Because you cannot take them in," a prison guard shouts to a line of families and volunteers wearing bright-blue "Get on the Bus" T-shirts, which Miya refused to wear.

She is holding a plastic bag with \$20 in \$1 bills, her birth certificate and a Mother's Day card. Miya remembers one time, when she was little, she threw a fit when the guards wouldn't let her bring in her lollipop.

A volunteer tells Miya to take off her earrings and put them in a bag. They will hold them until visiting hours are over. Miya hesitates. "Can I just ask the guards and see?" she pleads.

"Fine," the woman says.

After 45 minutes in line, Miya places her shoes and jewelry in a tray and passes through a metal detector. She puts her earrings back on. A guard recognizes her and says, "Oh, you know better." He smiles and logs the earrings onto a sheet as "personal possessions." He lets her go through with them.

Miya crosses into a walkway with barbed wire fences taller than trees. An armed guard monitors from a tower. A sign reads: "Deadly High Voltage Keep Out." An automatic door opens.

Across the field, dozens of women are pressing their faces against a big window, waiting for their children.

Miya passes through another checkpoint and scans the visiting room. She spots her mother waving and jumping around. Her mom is standing next to a 12-year-old boy with curly eyelashes.

"Mama!" Miya cries.

They collide with each other.

Her mom turns to the boy and looks at Miya.

"This," her mom says, "is your brother."

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'I'm Afraid'

Miya has not seen her brother, Terry Martin, for 9 years. Her mom, Kim Martin, 41, had not seen the boy since he was a baby. Terry's father, who is in the military, had refused to let Martin be a part of the boy's life until this year, when he agreed to let Terry participate in the "Get on the Bus" program.

Nervous and thrilled, Terry rode a bus to Chowchilla from Fresno.

The family sits at a table to eat hot dogs. It's almost like an afternoon at a carnival, with ice cream, a Polaroid photo station and kids' toys.

The three of them are all too worked up to take a bite. Martin found out late last night that Terry, whom she nicknamed "Gucci," would be coming today. She stayed up all night, waiting.

"So, tell Gucci how you feel about school," her mom says to Miya.

"I don't like school," she replies.

"You better get used to it," he says, slipping quickly into the little brother role.

All around them, women are trying to squeeze a lifetime of motherhood into a few hours. One mother cradles a sleeping baby in her arms. Another scolds her son, who is misbehaving. Outside, a mother swings a little boy around in her arms.

Martin tells her kids to do well in school. She does crossword puzzles with them. She lets them write notes on her T-shirt. She braids Miya's hair.

The siblings step away from the table to buy candy from a vending machine.

Martin says she worries about Miya.

"I'm afraid she's going down the wrong path," she says, dabbing her eyes with napkins. "Is she gonna grow out of it? Or is she going to end up like me? I feel guilty. I should have shown her a better way."

At 2 p.m., a guard announces:

"Ladies and gentlemen, make sure you get your hugs and goodbyes now. We're going to start to process you out."

Terry leaves first. Martin cries. "They lock us down a lot," Martin tells him, "so if I don't call you when I say I'm going to, I'm sorry."

"Bye, my little brother," Miya says, hugging him.

Then the guard calls her bus. Miya hugs her mom. "OK," Martin tells her. "Be good."

Miya says nothing as her mom is escorted away.

Waiting to exit, Miya watches the other families. One 7-year-old boy clings to his mom's waist as she tells him, "I love you baby. I love you. I got to go."

A volunteer pulls a sobbing little girl away from her mom, past a uniformed officer. The girl turns around and wipes her eyes, trying to get one last look at her mom.

Miya quietly watches it all, knowing she is not that little girl anymore.

Back in the security line, a guard logs her personal possessions. Birth certificate. Check. Earrings. Check. Check.

On the bus, Miya stretches across two seats. "I'm glad I got to see my mom for Mother's Day," she says, before falling asleep.

At 9:30 p.m., Miya arrives back in Los Angeles. Her grandmother pulls up to the bus stop in a white van, ready to take her home.

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