

A jail visit and a promise to a mother

This was Deputy Kiosha's house, and I was in it.

by [E. Carson Brisson](#) in the [February 10, 2021](#) issue



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Despite numerous notices prohibiting it, I entered the building with my cell phone. The officer at security immediately understood this meant I had no idea what I was doing. "First time with us," he observed. He advised me to take the phone to my car, and to be quick. Visiting hours would soon end for the day.

On my second try, I made it through security to the registration counter. The official behind the counter looked at my driver's license and asked me who I had come to visit. After a few deft clicks on her keyboard, she shook her head. The person I wanted to see could not be located. "It happens," she said, still staring at the computer screen. She called the shift supervisor.

The shift supervisor introduced herself as Deputy Kiosha. She was completely formal, all law. Her pale brown uniform was without blemish or wrinkle. Her duty gear was polished to a military shine. She did not rush as she spoke, nor did she avert her eyes to the right or to the left. This was her house, and I was in it.

Deputy Kiosha informed me that her shift and visiting hours would end before the “temporary confusion” could be resolved. I would need to return in the morning, after 9 a.m. As for the missing person, she said, “He’s here. We just can’t determine exactly where at present. These things happen.”

It seemed the right moment to say that losing track of arrested persons was not among the things that should happen, ever, and that it had a terrible frame of reference in American society, not to mention other cultures. So I said it.

Officer Kiosha did not flinch. She quickly agreed, noting that, as I perhaps was aware from news reports, the jail was being relocated to a new facility, a facility sorely needed after years of delay due to budget battles in the city council. She and her staff were experiencing temporary clerical glitches that were being corrected even as she and I spoke. No one in “her jail” was actually missing. She would not allow that.

I asked to talk to the supervisor. “I am the supervisor,” she replied.

I asked Deputy Kiosha if I could make an appeal for an extension of visiting hours. She told me she was the ranking deputy on duty. I asked her if I could make the appeal to her. “Go ahead,” she said, no intonation in her voice.

I told her about the phone call I’d received late that afternoon at the seminary where I worked a few miles away. It had been from an anxious mother whose 24-year-old son had been arrested in our city two days earlier. The mother’s pastor, one of my former students, had helped her call. The mother was in poor health and could not travel. She knew little about her son’s circumstances, but she had his case number. She’d asked if I would visit him. I had promised I would and that I would call her that evening with some word on his condition and hopefully a personal word from him for her.

When I finished my plea, Deputy Kiosha did not move. She did not avert her eyes. After a few moments of silence between us, and a growing sense on my part that I had been at best naive to think my words might make a difference, something flared

in the deputy's eyes. It was there and gone in the same instant. I could not name it, but I thought it must be irritation with me, or something worse. I leaned toward it being the something worse.

After another moment, Deputy Kiosha told me to wait at the registration counter, and then she left. She returned ten minutes later and told me to follow her.

We walked to the end of a hall and came to a set of swinging doors that opened into a large room with a polished concrete floor, cinder block walls, and a high ceiling. Against the wall to our left, a long, low bench ran most of the length of the room. Across the room to our right, a row of six backless stools faced a wall formed by six joined cubicles. Each cubicle had a large window facing out into the room. Each window was numbered and equipped with a circular metal speaker. Except for the deputy and me, the room was empty.

Deputy Kiosha instructed me to take a seat on the bench. She told me to remain seated until I was called to a window. She told me I'd have 30 minutes for the visit instead of the usual 15. Then she said, "Since you make promises, promise me you will tell him these walls were made from the tears of mothers. Tell him it is enough."

I was startled by Deputy Kiosha's sudden departure from formality, the unexpected extension of time for my visit, and her reference to maternal grief. As I recovered from my surprise, I promised to do as she had asked. Again something blazed in her eyes. Again it was there and gone in a moment. Again I could not decipher it but assumed the worst. Deputy Kiosha left the room.

I waited. I noticed that the light in the room was dim. I noticed that except for the bench and stools, there were no other furnishings in the room, not even a trash can. I noticed that the doors to the cubicles behind the windows had no interior handles. I noticed that my hands were shaking and I felt a little sick.

At around 6:20 p.m., the intercom crackled with an announcement: "Visitor to window six. Thirty minutes."

I suddenly wondered what the person I had come to visit had been told. I wondered what he looked like. I wondered what he was thinking. I wondered what he was accused of having done. I wondered if he would trust me with some word for his distraught mother. I wondered where on the withering earth I got the idea that I knew enough to be of any help.

As I stood to cross the room, Deputy Kiosha appeared at its entrance. “It will be alright,” she said. “He wants to see you.” I had not expected to see her again. I started to thank her, but she shook her head no. She averted her eyes to the cinder block walls as if she could see through them, lowered her head for a long moment, and was gone.

And then I understood. Deputy Kiosha could not see through the walls. She was listening to them, to the host of people who inhabited them, wronged and wrongdoers, their voices lifted up and weeping.

What had flashed twice earlier in her weathered eyes had not been a response born of her duties as shift supervisor. It had been anguish, the abiding kind, the kind that asks every day—and often deep in the night while dawn is still being debated—if you want to continue or if you’ve finally had enough, and then, with neither malice nor affection, awaits your answer.

And so I came to stand in the gray light before window six, in a temple of incarcerated confusion with sorrow living in its high walls. I did not know what I would say or do when the door behind the window opened. I knew only that I had made promises that day to not one grieving mother, but two.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “In the deputy’s house.”