

April 2010

Dear Governor Paterson,

On October 20th 1981 my mother, Judith Clark, participated in a robbery that resulted in the deaths of three men. I was eleven months old and have no memory of the day. But like any day that changes a person's life forever, I try to remember it, or I try to imagine my way into it. I know that my mother and I shared a room and a bed and I wonder how she felt when she woke up that morning. I wonder if I woke her or if she had, perhaps, been awake all night beside me. I wonder what she thought about as she got dressed and as she dressed me. There was a moment when she handed me to the friend who would care for me that day and this was the last time, on the outside, that my mother would see me, the last time that I would see her; I wonder if she had any apprehension of that. At some point in the day or in the coming days she must have realized that she and I would not be together again, but I could not have known this. I must have waited for her to come back. I was too young then to know that I was waiting or to know when I stopped waiting but I am twenty-nine years old now and old enough to know that I have never stopped waiting.

This is, in my experience, one of the forms grief takes—waiting with no certainty that what we wait for will ever appear. After my mother's arrest, my grandfather became my primary caretaker and when he passed away I waited a long time for him to come back. I remember this—lying in bed at night, very still, very quiet, listening for the door to open, for my grandfather to walk in. I knew he was dead and I didn't know he was dead; I hoped, instead, that he was playing hard to get. Until this time, my grandfather had been the one to drive me every weekend to see my mother. In the mornings he and I went to the mailbox together to retrieve the envelopes my mother sent me filled with drawings and stories. In the evenings he helped me address the letters I mailed back to her. One year my mother asked my grandfather to buy us matching bird books so that during our visits or over the phone she could describe to me the birds she saw from the window of her cell. At home each night my grandfather and I paged through my book and imagined the birds my mother had seen that day. After my grandfather's death I continued this practice on my own—taking the book off the shelf, paging through the pictures, memorizing bird types and traits. I did this with my mother in mind, trying to see what she saw, and I did this with my grandfather in mind, trying to coax him back to me. When my grandmother passed away eight years later, I was sixteen and old enough to know better, but maybe we are never old enough to know better because then too I waited a long time for her to come home.

On the day my mother left me, nine children lost their fathers. I think about those children and I think about how long each of them must have waited for their father to return. I have no way to know but I wonder sometimes if they are anything like me, if they have never been able to stop waiting. I wonder if the dream of return is something we will live with our whole lives. That I have been able to share my life with my mother, even through separation, has never been something I could take for granted. And so my mother and I have always been committed to each other, grateful for each other. When the judge sentenced my mother to live and die in prison he did it in the belief that she would never be able to change, that she could never understand the irreparable hurt she'd caused, could never bring

anything to bear in this world except harm. I do not know the woman who stood before him then, who appeared so beyond redemption. But I know the woman she has become, the woman she has spent three decades becoming.

Governor Paterson, for almost thirty years Judy Clark has worked to become the mother she wants me to have, a mother I feel so blessed to have. At the moments and places where my mother's remorse and shame could have broken her apart, she has worked instead to break herself open. And she is now the most open woman I know. She is open to my pain and needs, to the pain and needs of others, but she is open, also, to what is beautiful and possible all around us. This is what she's had to do in order to mother me—in order to look me in the face week after week, talk to me on the phone night after night, reach out to me in letter after letter. A woman who wants to mother her child as fully as my mother has committed to mothering me cannot give up on herself. My mother didn't give up on herself and I want very much to believe that this legal system hasn't given up on her either.

Not long after my grandmother's death, a woman asked me if my grandmother had been "like a mother" to me. "No," I explained, "I have a mother." The look on the woman's face made it clear that she found my answer pitiful. "But don't you think," she said, "that if your mother had loved you more, she wouldn't have left you?" It was a painful question but what strikes me now, looking back on it, is how shocked I was by the assertion. I had never, for one moment, questioned how much my mother loved me. I have felt my mother's love, her guidance, her understanding, her deep desire to be beside me, every day of my life. I have always felt her mothering and this, as much as any of the amazing work she's done inside, is why I believe in the possibility of change and the possibility of forgiveness.

I know why my mother had to be away from me for the last three decades. I know the harm she caused. I know there are people who live every day with their grief, who may live every day waiting for the person they love to come home. But I also know that you have the power to let my mother come home. I know you are the one person who can bring an end to my waiting. So I am asking you to grant clemency to Judith Clark. I am asking you to let my mother return, finally, to me.

Respectfully,

Harriet Clark