

January 20, 2017

Dear Commissioners of the Board of Parole,

I never thought that I would be in a position to write you or to address in any way the possibility of my mother's release. For most of my life, the possibility of my mother's release has been no possibility. And I've known that, always. I don't think anyone in my family explicitly told me that my mother would never come home but from a young age, I intuited that never. Every week I went to the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility to be with my mother and at the end of visiting hours, there were kids in the visiting room crying, screaming, pulling on their mother to come home; I remember feeling grateful, even from a young age, that I wasn't one of them. The cycles of hope and loss other kids went through struck me as a terrible punishment and I felt lucky, even as a little kid, to be spared the sort of hope that would have been, for me, false hope. As far back as I can remember, I knew that my mother deserved to be where she was and I knew that she had to stay where she was. It may seem odd to admit this here but there was a certain peace allowed by knowing that nothing could change for my mom or for me.

Then something did change. My mother began to get older; everyone began to get older. My grandfather died, my grandmother died, my father, my aunt, my little cousin—more and more people I loved became ill and passed away. And over time I began to understand something I had not understood when I was younger: that for my mother living in prison would mean eventually dying in prison. And this, Commissioners, is something I have not been able to make my peace with. The older she gets and the more I see the effects of her aging, the more I understand that if things stay as they have been, then she will do the rest of her aging in prison, she will die there, and I'm writing you now because I cannot make my peace with that.

What my mother lost by being in prison for the past thirty-six years—the chance to raise her child, to be with her parents in the last years of their lives, to build a home and career and community on the outside—I understand that she deserved those losses. I understand that this is one way in which justice works—those who have caused harm deserve to be harmed. And those who have been hurt deserve to see that the people who hurt them have been punished. I understand—and agree—that my mother's punishment must honor the seriousness of her crime. Not only because this is what justice demands but because this is what the people who've been hurt by her deserve—they deserve to see her hurting. Some of the people closest to me in my life have passed away and I know what it's like to lose someone forever. I know how much that forever-ness matters—the forever-ness of death and the forever-ness of grief. I understand why, for some people, only an exchange of forever-ness could feel like justice. And for people who need to be sure that something irrevocable has been taken from my mother, I want to say here that something irrevocably has.

Commissioners, what my mother has lost by being in prison for her entire adult life, she has lost forever. Releasing her after thirty-six years is not revoking her punishment. Her release now will not return to her or to me what her punishment took from us over the

past four decades. Nobody can—or should—give that back to us. I don't say that as a complaint; I say it as a promise. As much as anyone can, I have lived this sentence alongside my mother so I can speak from my experience as well as hers when I say that what we've lost has not been an un-serious loss. Thirty-six years in prison is a serious punishment. It does what the law requests: it reflects and honors the seriousness of her crime.

I have never said that my mother has “paid her debt to society” or that she has “done her time” because there is a wrapped-up tit-for-tat tone at play in those phrases that is so at odds with my own experience of grief and feels disrespectful to the suffering of the Paige, O'Grady, and Brown families. I think of the children whose fathers were killed and I know that their loss is a forever loss. And if there are people who take solace in knowing my mother will be punished forever, I want them to have that solace. I want them to know that if my mother is released, I will not be getting back the mother I lost. That woman is gone, those years are gone, the life we would have had together is gone. I am thirty-six years old now. When I ask you to let my mother come back to me, I am not asking you to un-do a loss. And what my mother and I will be to each other, what we will be able to have together, if she comes home, will not be a second-chance at the life we didn't have together. But whatever we can have together—whatever it looks like to be with your mother for the first time when you are thirty-six and she is sixty-seven—whatever that is, I want it.

Commissioners, my mother was part of a serious crime and she has paid a serious price; I have paid a serious price too. And so I say this to you as a serious request: I want to have these last years with my mother. I want the years ahead to be treated like the serious matter they are because these are the years that are left to us and these are the years in your power. I am not asking you to return to me the mother I didn't have; I'll never have her. I'm asking you for the mother I can still have. I am hoping because it no longer feels like false hope for the mother I have to come home.

Respectfully,

Harriet Clark