

PREFACE

It's late fall in Michigan. The skies are overcast and gray, heavily blanketed in cloud cover that blocks the sun. I hear the Canadian geese, honking loudly and defecating freely, before I see them. They populate the small pond outside of the double barbed-wire perimeter fence that surrounds the only women's prison in the state. Aside from the life at the pond, which is really an overflow basin, the prison grounds are bleak. Unlike many of the men's facilities where walkways are lined with golden yellow marigolds, purple pansies, yellow and white daisies, and black-eyed Susans, and where, after six months of clear conduct, men can request three-by-four-foot garden plots for growing their own fruits, vegetables, or flowers, the women's prison has none of the soul-soothing color and normality of those floral displays. It is the warden's choice to maintain the stark, concrete-block institution without color or contrast. Such barrenness challenges the spirit. There have been a number of "successful" suicides (and several attempts) during her two-year tenure as warden. This is the site of my research.

As I roll into the potholed obstacle course that passes as the visitor parking area, I immediately scan the other cars to see whether or not the study scribes are present and waiting. The scribes (Audrey, Danielle, Ashleigh, Sara, Brianna, and Jessica) are students that I hand-picked and trained to transcribe as much of the focus-group or interview conversations as possible. They are central to this research project because the warden has prohibited the use of any recording devices for research purposes. For "security reasons," the facility staff visually records all of our focus groups and one-on-one interviews, but they cannot make audio recordings per the Certificate of Confidentiality limitations issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Two scribes attend and transcribe each research meeting.

If we're all present in the reception area and set to go 30 minutes before our scheduled research period, and if the prison stars align,

entry procedures will go smoothly and we won't lose focus-group time. Most often, we're lucky. Seasoned officers are assigned to the reception desk. They know the procedures and they know me, so we work in tandem to have the appropriate items listed on the "in-and-out manifest," which is then delivered to the duty officer for his or her signature and authorization. When there's a newbie on the desk, everything takes three to four times as long. Freshly trained officers are never, ever willing to take suggestion from me about how to facilitate procedures.

Danielle and Ashleigh are waiting. We sign in on the visitors' log. We turn in our drivers' licenses and pick up our state ID cards. We secure our car keys, purses, scarves, and tissues in the \$.50 lockers for rent. Cell phones, prohibited in prison buildings, are left in our cars. Then we wait . . . for manifest approvals, which—if the duty officer is out on the compound—can take a very long time. Or we wait while family members and friends of the women inside are screened and delivered to the visiting room. Or we wait while the reception area officers take their breaks. But eventually we are called and can proceed.

Each time we enter, we take off our coats (no hoods allowed) and lay them on the counter for inspection. We walk through the metal detector. We take off our shoes and stockings, show the officer the bottoms of our feet, and slap our shoe soles together to demonstrate that we are not packing contraband. We are then patted down, spread eagle. We open our mouths for inspection and lift up hair that covers the backs of our ears. Finally, we list every item of jewelry each of us is wearing: earrings, rings, glasses, watches, ear/eyebrow piercings, necklaces with/without pendants, and so on. Once we are cleared for entry, the officer marks our hands with glow-in-the-dark letters of the day as though we're gaining admittance to a dance club. We're issued our garage-door-opener lookalikes, the PPDs (personal protection devices), that we must wear on our persons and that track our whereabouts on the compound. Each PPD has a grenade-like pull pin for use in emergencies. Three more sets of remote-controlled doors open and close behind us before we are on the compound and headed to the Programs Building and the deputies' conference room. This is the only room with visual, but no audio, facility recording. It is where I conduct all the focus groups and one-on-one interviews that provide the data for this study.

I have been going through these entry procedures since 1995 when my Quaker friend, Isabelle Yingling, who was the sponsor of Chapter 1014 of the National Lifers of America at the (since closed) other female facility in Michigan, asked me to come in and speak to the women about my research area, violence against women, a topic of interest to women who are often incarcerated “behind a man.” That meeting changed my life. The story the women tell is that “Lora fell in love with us.” I let that explanation hold because I certainly have come to love, respect, and honor many of those women and their successors. But it is also true that that meeting and my ongoing interactions with life-serving women opened a new world to me. A world that I had never considered, a world that was not in any life plan of mine, a world that I didn’t know existed except peripherally and simplistically as in “people who do bad things go to prison.” I had never thought about what it meant “to go to prison.” Or who went to prison. Or the systemic failures that result in imprisonment. Or why the system seems so inevitable and yet simultaneously remains so invisible. Or the ways that criminal justice arguments are presented as neutral when they are not neutral at all. Or how prison can become a site for resistance. Or how gender is constructed, maintained, and contested in prison. Or how incarceration results in silencing and voicelessness.

But I learned. Over time and particularly through this research, I learned about the soul-crushing effects of life imprisonment on life-serving women themselves. I learned about its damaging consequences to families, particularly children and communities. I learned that this system, designed for protection, creates more harm and suffering than it alleviates, particularly for disadvantaged and disenfranchised communities. I learned that life-serving women who theoretically would have no reason to manifest valuable human traits like empathy, compassion, inclusion, remorse, and integrity nonetheless manifest all those values while encased in a system that daily erodes their humanity. I learned about the irony in which life-serving women, arguably the most disempowered among us, are doing the most with the least to create meaningful lives in the stark conditions of imprisonment. This research, grounded in the voices of life-serving women, grew out of those lessons. Their collective stories demystify the dangerous stereotypes of prison “monsters.” They challenge cultural tropes of punishment and imprison-

ment. They expose fault lines in the criminal-processing system. They make the invisible and inaudible in state punishment both loud and clear. They show us the damaging consequences of mass imprisonment on our shared social fabric.

Their voices—from the extreme margin—carry important social messages. I hope they educate and contribute to the conversation on incarceration in America.