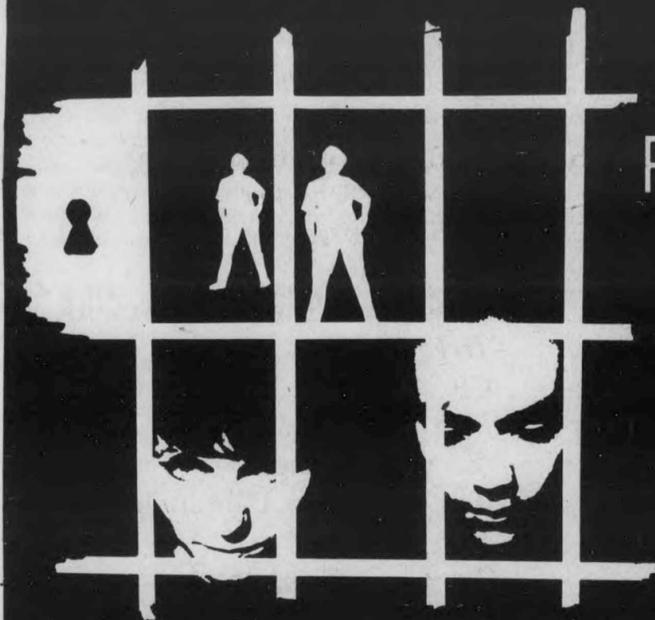


And Throw Away the Keys



Women
Prisoners
of the
Drug
Wars:

Profiles of a Convicted
Offender

by Kathy Kelly

"Flushing! ...Flushing! ... Flushing!"

I am in my room at Lexington Federal Prison. Next door are the washrooms. All evening long, through the wall between, I hear women shouting, "Flushing...flushing...flushing". They are calling out to warn other women who are taking showers, so that they won't get scalded, when the flushing toilets take the cold water and turn the showers burning hot. Terrible recriminations burst forth if the women who are flushing forget to shout or don't shout loudly enough.

That word keeps ringing in my ears. It has become an insistent metaphor for this prison and what our society is doing to women who fall victim to cultural disorganization and drugs. Images of these women, who have become my friends, keep coming before me. We visit, sharing anxieties and hopes. They talk about their fears for their children. They ask me to type long poignant letters to their Judges or members of Congress, or anyone else who might have the power to help them.

I am 36 years old. For 12 years, I taught religion and language arts in Chicago high schools. I am in jail for very idealistic reasons. I have come to believe that the existence of nuclear weapons poses a very real threat of exterminating all life. Beyond that, they are destroying the lives of million of people right now because of the trillions of dollars that are spent on the arms race rather than on meeting human needs.

I went to the Missouri nuclear missile fields where 150 Minuteman ICBMs are scattered throughout the state in individual underground missile silos surrounded by chain link fences. With others from a team of 15 people, I entered

five different missile silo sites during the month of August, 1988. We planted corn, sang songs, prayed for peace, and waited to be arrested. I was tried and sentenced to one year in prison.

Following two weeks in a bleak Missouri county jail and a government sponsored fly-around to three different facilities while in transit, I came to Lexington, FCI, one of five U.S. Federal prisons for women. I was thrown into an immensely overcrowded, teeming community of women and began to make friends immediately.

Maria was born in Colombia. Twenty years ago she came to the United States. "I arrived on July 24 and began to work on July 25!" she says, and she has worked ever since. She and her husband provided well for their children. Both children are now college graduates, who are raising families of their own.

At 49, Maria is tiny, robust and lively. She has warm light brown eyes. Sometimes you see in her eyes the pain she suffers because of severe arthritis in her back and shoulders. Even so, she walks cheerfully through the compound, finding

goodness in all.

I first met Maria in the "receiving and delivery" department of Alderson Federal prison, where guards informed both of us that we had been delivered to the wrong place. We were actually "designated" to Lexington FCI, I for health reasons and she as punishment for refusing to cooperate with a federal prosecutor.

Confined to solitary rooms in Alderson's segregation unit, we spent two weeks awaiting our next transport. Those were extremely painful weeks for Maria.

Maria told me that she owned a restaurant in Miami. One day a customer asked her to keep a large box of pampers for him, while he went to the airport to pick someone up. Maria obliged. Shortly afterward some police came in, seized the box, and found it full of cocaine. For refusing to implicate the owner of the box, she was sentenced to 38 months in prison.

When I met Maria, she had already served almost two years at Alderson Federal prison camp. Three months earlier, she had been taken back to Miami Federal Court because the prosecutor wanted to pressure her to name the owner of the box. They threatened to raise new charges against her family members.

The judge refused to accept new charges, but the prosecutors still managed to punish her. Her prison security level was raised so that she could no longer remain in a minimum security prison. After enduring the stress of prison transports and interrogations in Miami, Maria had looked forward to

returning to familiar faces and routines at Alderson. Instead she learned that she was being shipped to Lexington FCI, the maximum security prison for women.

She felt bewildered and frustrated by this arbitrary decision. At Alderson she had fully complied with the system's standard advice: "Don't do dead time". She was a model student. As soon as she learned to read, in Spanish, she began daily study of the Old and New Testaments. Knitting and other craftwork helped her pass the time industriously.

Maria's sadness deepened when she learned that her personal belongings had disappeared during her three month absence. The prison system had lost track of \$400.00 worth of yarn and knitted goods which belonged to her. "Well, I'll look into it", said one officer, but we never heard from him again.

At first, she believed that someone at Alderson could help her. Each time she heard footsteps coming down the corridor, she would crouch before her "chowhatch," pleading for attention when she realized that no one would or could help her, she retreated to solitude and the scriptures. She stopped eating for two weeks. Even some of the officers were worried when they saw her untouched food trays.

The sympathetic officers were resigned to a reality that Maria had just begun to comprehend. Regional designators shuffle prisoners as they would ship merchandise. An outspoken guard said it well when he shrugged and muttered, "She got 8 numbers, just like everybody else".

We didn't renew our friendship until six months later, when I was assigned to work with her in Central Park, a small courtyard surrounded by the prison buildings.

Concerned about her arthritis, I suggested a job change before winter set in. "No", Maria said, "the wind and sun are good for me". She does hope for a good pair of boots.

In February, when we'd arrived, the bare grounds and trees were grim. Now, in the radiant warmth of midsummer, Maria's kindly eyes glow with appreciation for the beauty of the park. She ambles along sun-drenched walkways, clutching two brooms in one hand and a dustpan in the other. "We're content," she says, and briefly sets down her equipment. She is most charming when she raises her short arms skyward and pivots about, looking like an animated Christ of the Andes. "God has given us this day," she often says, grinning. The she sets to work as a keeper of the earth.

In February, flocks of sparrows crowded into the branches of trees outside our windows. I felt accompanied by their songs. They crowded the branches of the gaunt trees as we crowded the dormitories and dining halls.

Maria thanks the birds for lifting her despondent spirits. "And for this, I love them so,"

she says, blowing a kiss toward the top of a nearby linden tree where sparrows nest. "They helped me remember how to see with my eyes as well as my heart. Miami has many birds, and many parks too, but I never paid attention to them. now, I love this little park, and every day I see the gifts of God in it. It is hard and sad to be separated from my husband, and my children, and by grandchildren, but I've learned a new way of life here."

She says her most important experience, since coming to prison, has been her renewed faith in God. She feels born again. At her prison job, in schools, or working various crafts projects, she is likely to be praying quietly. she goes often to the prison chapel.

Maria feels she was foolish to accept responsibility for the box, but she doesn't regret her choices since coming to prison. She seems remarkably at ease. Contrition? Reform? Well. She thinks that once it was wrong of her to evade the grandeur of morning skies.

I have no way of verifying Maria's account of her arrest and charges. Did she knowingly store drugs for a dealer? I don't know. I don't use lie detector tests. I just listen to people.

Maria's imprisonment stands, for me, as a symbol for the callousness and stupidity of the U.S. prison system. She is not alone. I could tell long, moving stories about numerous drug offenders whom I met in prison. Like Maria, none of them are perverse, selfish, or helpless people. They became involved in drugs because of the economic, political and psychological realities of the communities they lived in.

Certainly drug trafficking and drug use are serious problems. However, I don't believe the Bureau of Prisons contributes anything toward the solutions.

We don't use prisons to solve problems caused by alcohol and cigarette addictions. Neither should we expect imprisonment to solve the problems created when people who have certain psychological needs and cravings abuse drugs.

The cause of the drug crisis is not a lack of prison beds.

The drug problems grows because a growing number of people who crave drugs is served by a growing number of people who want economic opportunities and seek income producing advantages.

You can ameliorate problems of people who seek drugs as escape from life by improving the conditions of their daily life. We can ease the problems of those who serve the market by providing them with job opportunities and income opportunities that are better and more attractive than drug dealing.

To the general public, the women I met during this past year are dangerous criminals who should be locked up and forgotten. But I found quite a different picture: a world of desperate, imprisoned beauty.

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