Outta Joint at the Joint

By Cindy Simmons

\* The quotes in this story are reconstructed from memory as I no longer have the technology to listen to reel tape. Although the quotes exceed the old *New Yorker* standard, they are not verbatim.

I will start by admitting that I was anxious about going into the Penitentiary of New Mexico.

As a reporter, I had toured two other prisons, and always there were incidents. Thinking forward to this visit to New Mexico’s most notorious prison to report on a concert in the prison yard, I couldn’t turn off the uncomfortable feeling that it was a bad idea.

I spent a lot of time choosing my clothes that morning. The weather report said it was going to be hot, but I didn’t dare wear a skirt. At 33, at least by prison standards, I was attractive. And I had made the mistake of wearing a skirt once before when I went in to report on a prison in Wisconsin. I had had to endure catcalls for hours because of that. So I chose thin rayon pants in an innocuous floral print and a plain white polo shirt. Sneakers made sense since I’d be standing a long time, but the guards might confiscate my shoelaces, so I opted for a pair of flat sandals. My friend Juliette at the radio station had gone in for the concerts at the Penitentiary of New Mexico before. She warned me not to wear an underwire. She said sometimes the guards cut the wire out, ruining a $30 bra. Other times they’d take the bra and you’d have to spend the whole day bouncing in the prison yard.

Even though we were special guests of a sort, I had a lot of trepidation. I’d been assigned to medium security. These were guys who’d committed holdups and rapes. Crimes with guns.

About six of us from the station carpooled in together. We were all smiles in the car, but when we got out and the prison’s metal doors slid closed behind us, whatever dignity we walked in with was gone. The guards searched our recording kits and purses and looked in our shoes. The migraine pills I always carried were not in a prescription bottle, so they went in the trash. During the pat-down, the matron felt my bra for wires, purposely getting too close to my face.

I think the guards were trying to scare us into handing over any contraband. I had none, but I still felt guilty. The guards moved slowly. Their routine seemed choreographed to demean us. They said little, but their eyes made it clear: If something went wrong inside, we were on our own.

The prison administrators didn’t want us there. The only reason they allowed the Outta Joint at the Joint concert each year was because they had to: A federal court had ordered it as part of the Duran Consent Decree, imposed in 1980 after the second-deadliest prison riot in U.S. history. It was the worst riot by many measures. Thirty-three people were killed. Some of them were tortured.

We emerged into the prison yard blinking. I hadn’t brought my sunglasses and I immediately regretted the mistake. The sun beat down hard on the dirt of the prison yard where inmates pretending to have no interest in us stood in clumps of four or five. They drew circles on the ground with their shower shoes or just smoked.

Incarceration makes a person hard. Just as the steely-faced guards had no kindness for us, the inmates enforced distance with their eyes. While the others in our group set up microphones and amps for the musicians, it was my job to get one of these tough guys to open up and talk on tape to help our listeners understand why this was the happiest day of the year at the Penitentiary of New Mexico.

Outta Joint at the Joint was an annual concert and picnic in the prison yard. This was 1997, and at that point my station, KUNM, had been providing a blues band for the event for more than 12 years. There aren’t many parties in prisons, but this one was special because family members were allowed to walk freely in the yard. Of course there were all kinds of rules: No hugging or kissing. Once an inmate or family member committed to participating, they had to stay in the yard all day no matter what. Those rules applied to the people from my station, too.

There’s no public transportation to the prison, which is outside of Santa Fe, so most of the inmates didn’t have any visitors. These single guys stood in small clusters, not talking. I breezed past them. I was looking for a story of connection, somebody who symbolized the inside-out bond, the family love that sustains the lucky inmates whose kin do not disown them when they are convicted.

I set my sights on an awkward pair halfway across the yard. A twenty-something African-American man was shaking hands under the razor wire with a girl who looked about thriteen years old. There was hesitance, but even from the distance I could see they were magnetically pulled to one another.

“Hi, I’m doing a story for the public radio station on Outta Joint at the Joint.”

The ask is always the longest moment. I put myself forward, friendly and open. If the person agrees to be interviewed, everything else flows naturally. If they don’t, and if other people see someone turn me down, that pretty much ruins my chances with all of them.

I’m always amazed when people consent to an interview. What motivates them? Maybe it’s the desire to be understood, or for a little sliver of fame. This guy, I think, wanted the world to know him as he sees himself, as a father, not a convict.

“Sure. This is my daughter Monica. She came all the way from Massachusetts. I’ve never met her before.”

Then, as if my microphone wasn’t there, he addressed the girl directly. “You know I wanted to be there for you. You know that, don’t you?”

The intensity of these two strangers seeing each other for the first time, it was radio gold.

He asked her if she had gotten his letters. She said she saved them all in a box, more than a hundred of them.

I asked him what it felt like to meet his daughter.

He was a big guy, prison buff with biceps straining the seams of his sleeves. “She’s so beautiful,” he kept saying. Tears crept down his face, but he was smiling with the same joy I’ve seen in delivery rooms. “Even though I’m incarcerated, even though I’ve got years to go in here, no one could be happier than I am right now.”

I thought Monica might break from the weight of his emotion.

He said, “It’s been hard, hasn’t it, baby? It’s OK to say that.”

“It has, but it’s also been wonderful, Daddy. Your letters have been the thing I’ve looked forward to every month.”

I asked her what he said in his letters.

She stared at the ground. “He always tells me I’m beautiful.”

“She is beautiful. Just look at her,” he said. Then to the girl, “Your mother sent me your school pictures every year, the one with you in pigtails, the one where you’d lost your front teeth. And in every one of them, you are so beautiful.”

“Aw, Daddy.”

“You got that from your mother, you know. How’s she doing?”

The counter on my recorder turned over. One, two, three times.

“She had to move on, Daddy.”

“I know. Tell her I don’t blame her. Tell her I wish her well and I thank her for giving me the most beautiful daughter living on earth.”

I had everything I needed. I was just switching off the machine when Monica grabbed my hand.

“I need to tell my daddy something. Even though he’s incarcerated, even though I’ve only seen him this once in my whole life, his believing in me, he’s been the one solid I could count on, a letter in the mail every month.”

She looked at him. “A lot of girls don’t have that, they don’t have anyone who loves them the way you love me, Daddy. It’s so—I can’t say it exactly.”

His voice caught. “It’s OK, baby girl. I know.”

She was starting to cry. I didn’t need this, probably wouldn’t use it, but I switched the recorder back on. Monica saw me do it and took the microphone. She started to sing a love song that was popular at the time. It was low and guttural, really about romantic love, but from this 13-year-old, it was about her first love, this guy who was a number to the Department of Corrections, a guy who for 364 days this year probably expressed no emotion at all, except in letters he knew would be read by the censors before they were mailed out.

When she sang, “Have I ever told you you’re my hero?” I had to look away.

When I turned back to them, they were both weeping slow tears. The rules did not allow them to hug, but he reached out and squeezed her shoulders.

When the song was over, I walked away, sure I didn’t need to tape another word.

It’s funny the sense of relief you get once you’ve got your tape. I was free to enjoy the concert, chat up anybody in the prison yard or just bake in the high desert sun. The party wasn’t for me, though, and the warmth and connection I felt standing with Monica and her dad quickly evaporated. I was in a prison yard, carrying hundreds of dollars’ worth of recording equipment. It would be hours before I could leave.

The few guys who dotted the perimeter did not look interested in small talk. I could have interviewed them about prison conditions, but that would lead to long letters and collect calls for a story I had not been assigned. It seemed kinder to just let them enjoy this one day.

I headed over to the picnic area. Inmates who didn’t have visitors had flocked to that side of the yard when the food arrived. Somehow, having something to talk about, even if it was beans and macaroni salad, animated them.

I fell in line and listened to their chatter. Once I was served, it struck me as sad that this quality of food could cause so much excitement. The beans were mealy, barely edible, and the “fruit” punch reminded me more of anti-freeze than anything that had ever grown on a tree.

After that unsettling main course, I got in the brownie line, hoping something sweet would remove the chemical taste of the punch. That’s when I noticed I could not see my hand.

Damn. I was getting a migraine.

Colored lights would soon be followed by tunnel vision, and then I would not be able to see anything at all.

This one came fast. There wasn’t enough time to walk to the other end of the yard where my friends from the station were settingup equipment for the band. Already I couldn’t see the inmate I knew was a foot in front of me in the line. I just had to trust him.

I said, “I need some help,” and then I waited. Losing my sight was scary, but it would probably only last 40 minutes, an hour at most. My more immediate concern was that soon the language part of my brain was going to shut down and I would be unable to put words into logical order. That could last all day.

“I know this sounds strange, but I’ve lost my ability to see and I won’t be able to talk in a couple minutes. I’m getting a migraine.”

The voice that came out of the dark asked, “What do you need?”

What I needed was to lie down in an air-conditioned room with the blinds drawn. What I needed was the pills the guards had taken.

“Could you help me get into the shade?”

They discussed it—two, maybe three of them. I couldn’t count.

“I’m sorry. There isno shade.”

I tried not to descend into self-pity. Yes, without my pills I was going to be in tremendous pain. Yes, light made it much worse. But there was nothing to be done.

Then I felt a cooling.

“The best we can do is cast our shadows on you.”

I wish I’d had my tape rolling. They stood there until I could see again, until the harsh New Mexico sun did not hurt my eyes. They missed the concert, missed a big chunk of the one day of the year that they could move freely about the yard and mingle with visitors.

They said they didn’t mind. I couldn’t put the word ‘thank’ in front of the word ‘you,’ but I think they knew how grateful I was.

Sometimes all a man has to offer the world is his shadow. Sometimes that is enough.