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Behind the Walls with the Coronavirus

On March 12th news echoed down the concrete halls that visitation was suspended for 30 days. That's a huge deal in prison, and although Anderson Cooper and David Muir had been vigorously warning us, that announcement prompted exclamations like, "This shit's getting' real!" Every day or two after that something changed. Prison Performing Arts cancelled even though we'd begun rehearsals of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, dogs from the service training program were removed from the facility, chow hall and recreation schedules segregated us by housing units, all church volunteers were banned, and on April 15th we were all issued a face mask sewn at a prison clothing factory. The masks are fashioned from state bedsheet fabric and so far we are only required to wear them when we go to Medical. Speaking of Medical, on April 17th all those who regularly take Albuterol breathing treatments for asthma or COPD were issued inhalers. We assume the breathing treatments will be used for Coronavirus patients when the shit hits the fan. We assume, because we are not told.

Rumors swirl between staff and inmates, so far no one knows the truth. I do know for a fact that I'm 71 with a heart condition and compromised lungs from over 30 years sucking in thick second-hand prison smoke. And I'm hardly the only prime candidate to die in this prison.

We who have been distanced from society by razor wire fences cannot socially distance ourselves from one another. We cohabitate literally on top of each other, six to a cell, breathing each other's exhaust, touching every faucet, doorknob, and phone receiver behind each other. County jails drop off "fresh meat" on our doorstep every day. Staff travel in and out. We are as vulnerable as nursing home prisoners- more so because our medical care is minimal. I believe "adequate" is their technical term, except adequacy is in the eye of the beholder.

A few years ago, scabies terrorized our whole prison. Scabies are microscopic spiders buried and burrowing under the skin. Very painful. We could not force medical to diagnose this horrid infestation that's as common in close communities as head lice. The prison doctor traveled to our wing- the first house call I'd ever witnessed and told our assembly we were group hallucinating. We peaceful long-serving lifers were supposed to believe we had suddenly decided to go nuts and had the rashes to prove it? A week later he decided our shower water was too hot. (That really pissed us off because everyone knows there's no hot water in the winter.) I actually broke down sobbing in frustration when the nurse practitioner told me I had eczema and had had it all my life.

After more than six tortured months of bitching and itching, but only after mothers in the free world called the warden, then state legislators, three of us were shackled, chained and transported to a dermatologist who diagnosed the problem in 10 seconds. I won't even go into the incredibly inept manner we were all treated. Do you now see why we are concerned about this quick-killing virus?

My Grandma Slaughter who was a coed at Mizzou in 1918 and told of dead students who were rolled up in their bedding, hauled from her dormitory and stacked like cord wood on the sidewalk because there was no place to store them. Honestly I thought she was exaggerating until years later I read about the Spanish Flu Pandemic in an old National Geographic. I had no clue the virus spread globally and killed more soldiers than World War I. Will this pandemic also be forgotten so easily with time?

I tease my sheltered-in-place loved ones about getting a taste of house arrest. My ex-con friends are taking this like champs. Amy quipped, "Stay home with a kitchen, bathroom and TV? Sweet?" Although, in reality she's working an entry-level job in a low rent nursing home while constantly trying to protect herself and the residents. My middle-aged children in Kansas, Illinois and Missouri are scared to death that I'll die in here, so I've been checking in with them, jockeying for position in the phone line, nearly daily- trading updates on TP shortages, trips to the store dressed like bank robes, online schooling and meetings plus just plain old fear of the invisible enemy stalking us all.

Since March 23rd I've been seriously sewing surgical masks for ER personnel. I call this The War Effort, and like Rosie the Riveter, I proclaim "We can do it!" A hospital in Ohio sent us a note explaining that tears came to their eyes when they opened their box of much needed multicolored masks. I and my crew are proud to be helpful- to save lives- to be of worth, even though I leave my Singer every afternoon feeling like a myopic Quasimodo.

After I was tossed in prison in the mid-80's, I worked in the Education Department as a clerk/tutor until 1995 when computer programming training came to our facility. A small group of us were tested, groomed and taught how to write fast and efficient code for the state's IMB AS-400 Mainframe. For the next 20 years I designed applications and educated new recruits. This was fascinating and demanding work that I truly loved. We actually gained our program due to a gender discrimination class action suit brought against the Department of Corrections, but in 2015 our shop was abruptly taken from us and given back to male prisoners. With a dull thud I found myself jobless for the first time in my life.

There's no such thing as unemployment or retirement in this prison. I had to find a job or end up scrubbing toilets. Don't get me wrong. Janitorial service is a noble profession and essential, but I require a better reason to exist. So, I found a job making items to be donated to homeless and domestic abuse shelters, nursing homes, facilities for abandoned children and juveniles, Ronald McDonald houses and anywhere there's a need. My Granny Snow taught me to how to make patterns and sew. I created miniskirts and Nehru jackets in college and with

motherhood fashioned stylish outfits for my children. Before we began The War Effort making masks, I was creating special adult bibs for nursing home residents. Geriatric Care Facilities are prisons for people whose only crime is continuing to live. These folks deserve to wear fun, colorful fashion at mealtime, so I made that my mission.

Last summer an entire housing unit was emptied out because of staff shortage. Where did the occupants go? They filled up the empty beds in cells on all the other housing units. In other words, we were squashed in the six-person cells that were originally four-person cells. On April 19th a small group were quarantined in the empty house because they were exposed to a staff person who was confirmed positive for Covid-19. From our barred windows we saw them lugging their bedding, but we had no idea why until a captain came to our wing that to tell us the truth. After that day a parade of women have gone to and come back from there all through the rest April, May and June.

On June 15 we were on lockdown so all inmates and staff could be tested for Covid-19. We heard the Army National Guard would be here, so some girls fixed their hair and makeup in hopes of seeing real men as well as being seen. As luck would have it, our regular nurses tested our wing. We were sent to our cells (8 up and 8 down) then called out by cell to endure the sinus swabs. A friend who was in the hole that day reported they were roused at 3 AM, herded to a hallway and handcuffed to a bench. After they were violated but still cuffed, they sat in stunned silence like rape victims. Nothing in prison is eased into.

That was a Monday. Tuesday evening at 7:30 the phones all over camp were shut off with no warning. That usually happens when an inmate dies, so everyone began squawking. I call this the hen house effect. When chickens feel threatened, they go nuts. Inmates are no different. Then someone noticed a parade of girls carrying their bedding to the empty house. The hens started in again. The next morning, we received notice from the acting warden that seven ladies tested positive. What's really crazy is that day, the day after the mass migration, all the girls returned to their original beds. Then the hapless women who tested positive, 10 by then, were escorted to the empty house because there was no room in the infirmary.

Right now, only essential workers leave the room except for meals and meds. Meals are fed by wing only. Recreation is also by wing. We still don't have a handle on this pandemic. Before an inmate can parole, she must test negative for Covid-19 and if she doesn't, her wing is locked down for 14 days. At least that's what we think. No one has told us. I'm fortunate to have yarn, books, writing materials, telephone minutes, a TV and great cellmates.

What's a nice girl like me doing in a place like this? My husband was murdered and I was attacked in February of 1984. I knew no one who was ever arrested or in any kind of trouble with the law, so I had no idea how police tunnel vision works. They looked at no other suspect but me. A year later when we went to trial, I was offered plea agreements that would have freed me by 1990, but I stubbornly refused to deal. Surely the jury would see that there was no reason for me to kill my husband and no evidence pointed to me. But I didn't

understand the psychology of juries. Most citizens think police would never arrest and charge a person who is innocent. Those who have had a brush with the law aren't picked for jury duty for this reason.

Needless to say—I was convicted and sentenced to Life with No Parole for 50 years, then released on appeal bond for another year. During that time, I continued to care for our five half-grown children, the farm and business and enrolled at the university. I reasoned that I needed to complete my teaching degree to make a living for the kids. That goal is another example of the magnitude of my stupidity.

During my 34 years in captivity, I and my compadres have endured much mayhem and madness. The Great Flood of '93 swept our prison into the Missouri River, so we were relocated to a men's prison on higher ground. If you think bugging out of a whole facility went smoothly, you have never worked with a government entity.

A couple of years later we survived what we lifers lovingly named "The Lice Festival" where the entire dorm of around 100 women were ordered to turn in all of our clothes, undies, socks, coats and bedding, were chemically deloused in the showers (whether you were lousy or not), and while dripping wet were issued a large black garbage bag to rip or chew head and arm holes. We wore our bags and nothing else, all night shivering and huddled on bare plastic mats. As awful as that winter night was, no one died.

That's not to say no one ever dies in prison. This poor young girl in the cell next to mine died from an abscess tooth after weeks of complaining to medical. (Sadly, I can't recall her name.) Others die of chronic health problems while some take their own lives. The incarcerated range in age from teens to octogenarians. You may be surprised to see how many are in wheelchairs.

When I was jerked away from my life and thrown in custody, I feared prison would be teaming with the despicably dangerous, but I was wrong. Not one inmate has ever frightened me. I have met, lived closely with and endured state-imposed insanity with some of the best women on the planet. I wish I could record videos and introduce the world to these humorous, compassionate, loyal "dregs of society." Rich people don't come to state prisons, which in reality are modern versions of the poor houses and debtor's prisons of old. Most inmates had no money for fast talking lawyers. As the old prison saying goes, "Money talks and bullshit walks."

Never in all my years have we come up against an invisible deadly force such as Covid-19. The H1N1 flu was no bed of roses, but we endured no fatalities. We truly fear we will not be so lucky with this flu. Visits are still not possible. I've never been separated from my loved ones for this long. My family and I have been waiting a whole decade for a response to our most recent executive clemency application. With a stroke of his pen, the governor could send me home along with the other harmless geriatrics. Meanwhile we wait and keep an eye out for the Angels of Death to slide in through the chain link.

Yesterday as I left the shower, an old lady in the dayroom wailed, "Nobody thinks about us! Nobody cares about us!" I stopped dead in my shower-shoed tracks and asked, "Denise, did you ever think about prisoners before you got in trouble? I didn't. Prisoners were not on my radar because I knew none. I saw none except the infamous ones like Charles Manson. We are more invisible than the homeless." I resumed the walk to my cell while pondering, "When the virus hits us hard, will our deaths become stats on CNN or will we even count at all?"

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