



Too often when someone is in jail, the first question that comes up is “What did that person do?” It comes up before that person is allowed a face or a voice or a story that is her own creation. In the case of women especially—for those touched by the many manifestations of poverty, violence and discrimination—we must train ourselves to reframe our questions, thinking from the onset “What happened to them? Who are they, and what can they teach us?”

This collection is set up not only to give the women whom our society incarcerates a face, but to raise the most important questions facing families undergoing cycles of imprisonment, rupture of relationships, and closed doors. Through these stories and family letters, a rich picture emerges, not only of the real lives of the women we find behind bars, but of what a compassion-based writing project can do in terms of re-creation of family, new relationships, new directions and the slow building of new skills.

This new and expanded edition includes 65 pages of writing by teens (ages 16-21) incarcerated in Long Island’s three jails. Together these writings will take you through thinking about a number of issues which are on the verge of change or have changed through action in the New York State Legislature during the years when the stories were written. They will give you a first-hand look into what happens to children who are placed in foster care through no fault of their own, and what happens to children whose parents are incarcerated, how the ghosts of the conditions that caused incarceration continue during reentry. As those coping with reentry and those fighting for restorative justice join their voices, they will give you a sense of the relationship of issues and root causes.

Whether you are reading this book in your prison cell or in a classroom, whether you are a corrections officer or someone just beginning to look at the impact of the criminal justice system, we hope that these stories will inspire you to add you own voice to whatever most needs to be said.

VOICES / Memoirs from Long Island’s Correctional Facilities

VOICES



Memoirs from Herstory Inside Long Island’s Correctional Facilities



\$19.95 per copy.
Please check with our office to receive discounted copies for classroom use.



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Roll Up

Melody Roker Sims



Melody left Riverhead Correctional Facility in time to be a reader at Herstory's tenth anniversary celebration in 2007, where she expressed the wish to live as a writer and to train someday to be a facilitator. This led her to join our bridge workshops, where she worked for well over a year. Although Melody, like so many other women facing the struggles of reentry, has had her hands full with the challenges of daily life, she periodically returns either to the bridge group or to join other formerly incarcerated writers at our public readings.

This piece has remained as her contribution to the study of what happens to women who are victims of domestic violence who fight back. She has read it in a number of Long Island venues, including the Islip Museum of Art, the Islip Public Library, St. Joseph's College, Suffolk Community College and Queensborough College, and in Harlem at a meeting of the Coalition for Women Prisoners in support of a bill to revoke or lighten the sentences for victims of domestic violence who fought back in self defense. At a classroom presentation at St. Joseph's College she told students of criminology that Patricia, the young woman in this story, had been freed through the new bill.

"Roker. Roker. Roll up! Bedford Hills has come for you." Excited but scared and disoriented as I begin to focus, I look to see what time it is on the clock outside the bars on the walkway—4:30 A.M. People I've gotten to know and became close with are waking up, as the guards begin to wake up another female on the opposite housing unit that will be my partner going upstate, I guess. Bedford Hills wants her too.

As I begin to file away my clothes and a pair of sneakers, with the exception of my outfit I put aside for this day, I pray silently: *Dear Lord, thank you for waking me up, and Dear Lord, please do not let no harm or danger come to me in this unknown place, what I'll soon have to call my home, and please, Lord, protect me. Don't let me get raped or beat up. Lord, thank you for relieving me from myself. In Jesus' name, amen . . .*

Before starting on the ride to Betty's house (Bedford Hills) in a sheriff's car, a woman and male deputy are my escorts. While holding my mug shot, the female deputy asks me my name, date of birth, home address and Social Security number. After giving the information she requested of me, her partner handcuffs me and then he puts the front shackle on my ankles, which makes it very hard for me to move, so he helps me into the back seat of their squad car, and while they do the same thing to my partner, while listening, I learn her name is Patricia. I wonder: *Is she just as scared as me? Is she an addict like me? What's her charges? She looks like a baby.*

As the officer helps her into the car, I notice that the tears are pouring down her face. Instantly my heart goes out to her and I don't feel my fear.

I can't help but to say to her, "It's going to be okay, don't cry."

She says, "I'm trying not to."

While sobbing she asks me have I been upstate before.

I tell her, "No, but I hear it's better up there than here—the air, the food . . . and although you're locked up you're allowed more freedom."

She says, "Promise me that you won't leave me."

"Well, I don't know if I can make that promise, but I will promise to be with you for as long as I can. But since this is our first time upstate, maybe we will be sent to the same facility".

She asks me, what am I in for? I tell her for selling drugs to an undercover cop and for possession. She asks me, how long do I got to be locked up for? I tell her three to six years, but my lawyer got the judge to give me the Shock program.

I asked her how old was she? She replied, 17. I asked her, was those her sisters and brothers in the picture she held in her hand? She said, "No, they are my three children." I thought to myself, *17 with three children. UNBELIEVABLE.*

I asked her what she was in for. She said "Manslaughter." I couldn't believe what she just said. She then explained to me that

her children's father was 20 years her senior and used to beat her every day—started when she was four months pregnant with their first born and when he started beating her kids, which in the end she lost custody of them, she made a vow that the next time he raised his hands to beat her she would kill him, and she did just that.

I wondered: *Would or could I ever commit a crime like that?* I asked her how much time did she get? She said 25 years to life. I almost fainted but instead I shed tears for the innocence lost and stolen from this child and for the childhood she never had.

I would learn later that she was one of thousands that I would meet on my journey to finding myself again while at Betty's house. Patricia and I sat there silent, lost in our own worlds as the deputies were talking and driving.

To break the silence I said, "Well hi, I'm Melody."

The first smile I see when she says, "Pleased to meet you. Hi, I'm Patricia."

Somehow I knew I made of my first friend on this journey, but I also knew life would never be the same again for either one of us.

