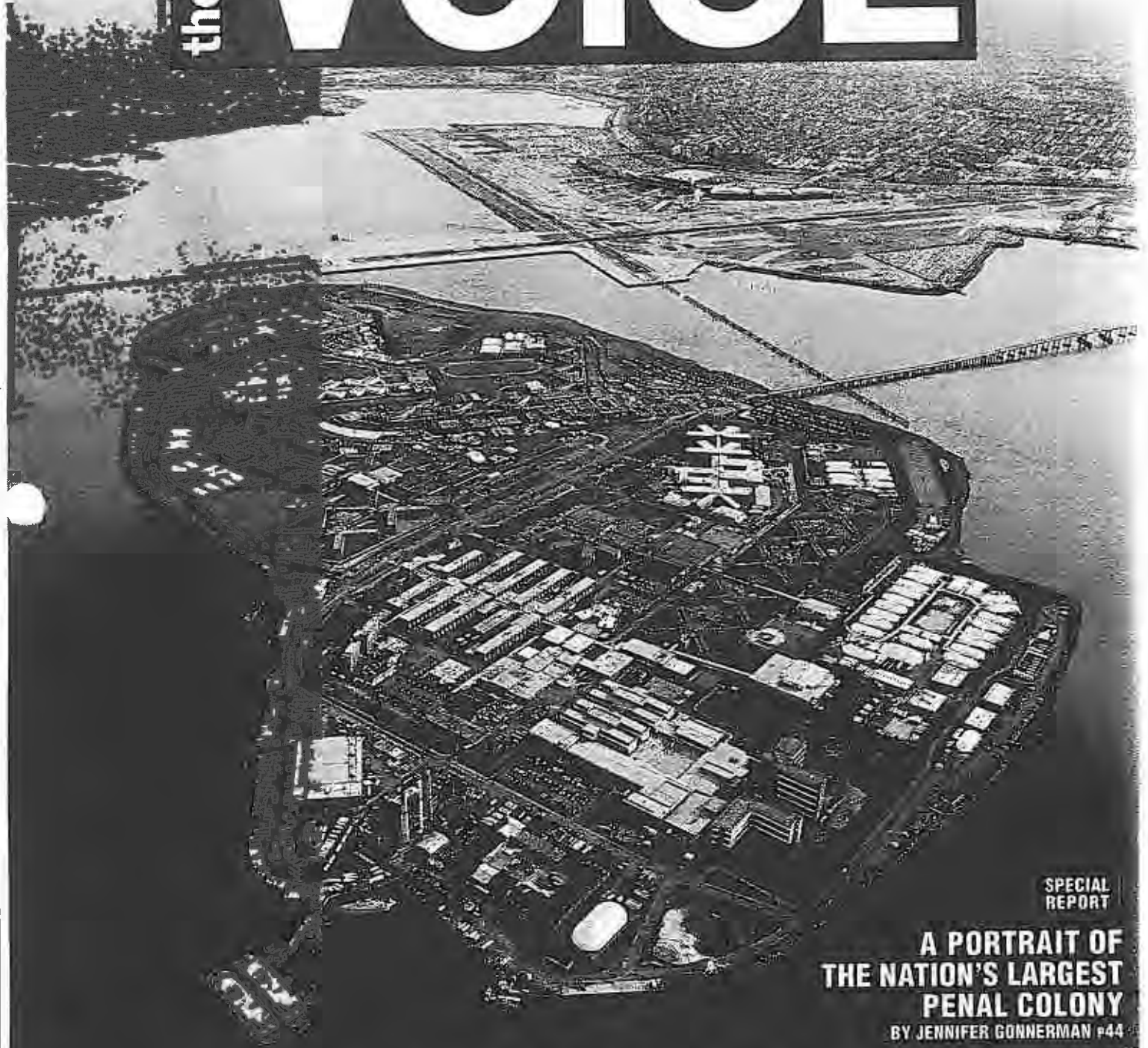


PHOTO BY JEFFREY M. HARRIS FOR THE VILLAGE VOICE

the village

VOICE



SPECIAL
REPORT

**A PORTRAIT OF
THE NATION'S LARGEST
PENAL COLONY**

BY JENNIFER GONNERMAN p44

INSIDE RIKERS ISLAND

VIEW THROUGH THE RAZOR WIRE: OTIS BANTUM CORRECTIONAL CENTER, HOME OF THE CENTRAL PUNITIVE SEGREGATION UNIT, BETTER KNOWN AS THE BING





Inside and Out: A Two-Part Special Report on Prison and Its Aftermath

This year, the United States achieved a dubious distinction: It surpassed Russia as the world leader in imprisonment, with one in every 130 people living behind bars. The U.S. prison population has soared above 2 million, and most of those inmates are locked up for non-violent crimes. People are also leaving prison in record numbers; in 2000, an unprecedented 600,000 prisoners will return home. The imprisonment boom, fueled largely by the nation's war on drugs, has generated new industries and jobs. It has also devastated neighborhoods, fractured families, and created a new class of stigmatized people who will one day return to society. To explore the human cost of America's growing punishment industry, *The Village Voice* is publishing a two-part special report. This week: an in-depth portrait of the nation's largest penal colony. Next week: one ex-con's struggle to rejoin her family.

Roaming Rikers

By Jennifer Gonnerman

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW LICHTENSTEIN

Hidden between the boroughs of New York City, a two-lane bridge rises from the northwest shore of Queens and extends more than a mile over the East River. Planes descending into LaGuardia

STUN SHIELDS, STRAY CATS, BUCK-FIFTIES, BOOFING: THE TOP BRASS'S TOUR OF AMERICA'S LARGEST PENAL COLONY

Airport roar overhead constantly, while thousands of cars and buses commute each day across this steel-and-concrete roadway. Still, the bridge remains unknown to most New Yorkers. A mere 11 miles from Lady Liberty's raised torch, it dumps passengers at the front door of the nation's largest penal colony: Rikers Island, where 10 jails sprawl across an area half the size of Central Park. See GONNERMAN page 46

The island is the heart of New York City's jail system, home to 80 percent of its 14,600 or so inmates, with nine jails for men and one for women. Rikers' daytime population—including prisoners, employees, and visitors—is enormous, nearly 20,000. All residents are temporary. Two-thirds of the inmates are detainees—legally innocent and waiting for their cases to crawl through the courts—while one-third have been sentenced and are waiting for an empty bed in an upstate prison or are serving a year or less here.

As New York City's jail system has grown over the decades, Rikers Island has become something of a small town, with schools, medical clinics, ball fields, chapels, drug rehab programs, grocery stores, barbershops, a bakery, a power plant, a track, a tailor shop, a bus depot, and even a car wash.

Despite these signifiers of civilization, it is notoriously difficult to get onto Rikers Island without a gold badge, a visitor's pass, or a pair of steel cuffs around one's wrists. A reporter's notebook or television camera, moreover, will likely get one only nervous glances and a polite refusal of permission to tour the jails. But here I was one summer morning, riding in a shiny black Mercury Grand Marquis belonging to Bernard Kerik, the commissioner of New York City's Department of Correction.

Kerik would later become the city's police commissioner, but on this day his promotion was still only a whispered possibility, a rumor that had been spreading through Rikers' jails for nearly a year. In August, when Mayor Rudolph Giuliani picked Kerik to lead the nation's largest police department, he pointed to the jail chief's performance managing prisoners and guards; though the mayor didn't mention it as a selling point, perhaps equally attractive to him was Kerik's demonstrated ability to manage the city's media.

On this day, as his driver steered his car toward the Rikers Island bridge, Kerik looked like a corporate executive on his way to the office, wearing a gold Rolex, his thinning hair slicked straight back, a silk tie knotted tightly, and shoes buffed to an obsessive shine. Kerik, 45, has six holes in his left earlobe—evidence of a prior stint with the NYPD, when he worked undercover as a ponytailed drug dealer. But today his spit-and-polish image seemed part of his effort to paint over the jails' lingering reputation of overcrowding and violence.

Beginning in the late 1980s, riots injured hundreds of inmates and guards on Rikers Island. And after the Bloods, an African American gang, began recruiting members here in 1993, a vicious turf war erupted between the Bloods and the long dominant Latino gangs, the Latin Kings and Netas. Prisoners' blood regularly decorated jail hallways, and officers dubbed the jail for teenage boys "Vietnam." For some wardens, jail management meant shipping their most violent inmates to another facility under the pretext of reducing overcrowding. At the time, it seemed that the prisoners ran Rikers.

Kerik had surprised me by approving my request to roam around Rikers. Although he rarely granted journalists more than a few hours of access, he permitted me to spend a total of eight summer days on the island, presumably because he was eager to show how he had tamed Rikers, how he'd reinvented leadership on an island where crime—slashings and beatings and stabbings and riots—had once seemed beyond control.

Even before he became the leader of the NYPD, Kerik liked to draw comparisons between his job and the police commissioner's. "People just assumed New York City was out of control and could never be changed," Kerik said. "But look at the drop in crime. All of the things people said five years ago could never, ever, ever be done—they told me the same thing about Rikers Island."

Kerik's strategy for rehabilitating Rikers included improving its appearance as well as its crime statistics. "I'm an image guy," he said. "Somebody in uniform . . . is supposed to earn respect. [If] you walk up and have mustard stains on your tie, your hat is on sideways, you have keys all around you—people think you're a joke. . . . Some of these guys looked like they ironed their clothes with a hot rock." Kerik paused. "If it's my agency," he added, "you look the way I want you to look." Kerik's campaign to win respect for Rikers, and for himself, involved not only well-pressed uniforms but also good press. At this, he excelled, landing positive stories in the *New York Post*, the *Daily News*, and *The New York Times*.

As the car nosed across the bridge, LaGuardia appeared on our right, so near that we drove over a pier of lights pointing pilots to Runway 13-31. And then once past the gates, here we were, heading down a quiet two-lane street lined by high-tech modular jails and aging brick jails and razor-tipped wire twisting around 12-foot fences.

Rikers prisoners refer to their home as "the Rock," but from an archaeological point of view it's more accurate to call this place a dump. Long before Rikers Island housed the accused, it served as the repository of what the city proper had no use for—broken boilers, old sofas, horse manure, garbage, tin cans, street sweepings, and earth from subway excavations. First arriving on the island's south side in 1893, the refuse burned all day, attended by hordes of rats feasting on the city's leftovers.

As the garbage grew, so did the island. Only 87 acres when New York City bought it from the Riker family in 1884 for \$180,000, the island had, three decades and thousands of boatloads of trash later, swollen to nearly five times its original size, reaching some 415 acres. The island was transformed into a different sort of dumping ground in 1935, when the Rikers Island Penitentiary opened.

Sending prisoners to Rikers continued New York City's Victorian strategy for dealing with undesirables. The islands rising from the East River in the middle of New York City have long been receptacles for the sick, poor, violent, and mentally ill. Over the last 200 years or so, they've housed insane asylums, a paupers' cemetery, tuberculosis tents, a home for delinquent teenagers, and a hospital for such infectious diseases as smallpox and yellow fever.

Now our drive ended in front of Commissioner Kerik's office, a pale yellow trailer, the seat of his power. His path here began in 1993, when he

See GONNERMAN page 48



(BOTTOM LEFT) BERNARD KERIK: FROM "MAYOR" OF RIKERS ISLAND TO NEW YORK'S TOP COP. (BELOW) INSIDE THE GANG INTELLIGENCE UNIT: POLAROIDS RECORD INMATES' SLASHINGS.



GONNERMAN from page 47

moonlighted for Giubani's mayoral campaign, managing the cops who worked as the candidate's bodyguards. After Giubani won, he appointed Kerik head of the Department of Correction's investigations division. Kerik rose to the agency's number two position in 1995, despite the fact that he lacks a college degree.

When Michael Jacobson, a budget expert with a doctorate in sociology, resigned in 1998, Kerik became the leader of the \$860-million-a-year agency, and now, in his office, I was staring at the framed photographs adorning its fake wood-paneled walls—one, of Giubani, was obligatory, but another, of Oliver North, I imagined might indicate quite a bit about the well-groomed commissioner. On his desk, a blueberry-scented candle burned, an attempt to override the stench left by the stray cats that resided beneath his trailer.

"We try to run the agency like corporate America," explained Kerik. "In corporate America, if you can't do the work, you have to go." I didn't doubt his sincerity. A little later I watched about 120 deputy commissioners, assistant commissioners, bureau chiefs, assistant chiefs, wardens, deputy wardens, assistant deputy wardens, captains, and officers stand as their boss marched into another trailer-turned-conference room at 8:03 a.m. On Rikers Island, management meetings always start the same way, with the sound of chairs scraping the floor in unison.

Kerik took his seat on the dais next to William J. Fraser, an enormous, ruddy-faced former guard who was then the agency's highest-ranking uniformed member, the only person in the room with four gold stars pinned to each shoulder. Fraser's official title was "Chief of Department," though he could also have been described as Kerik's enforcer. (When Kerik left for the NYPD, Fraser was named to succeed him, ensuring his boss's legacy.) Now, from their perch at the front of the room, Kerik and Fraser surveyed their managers.

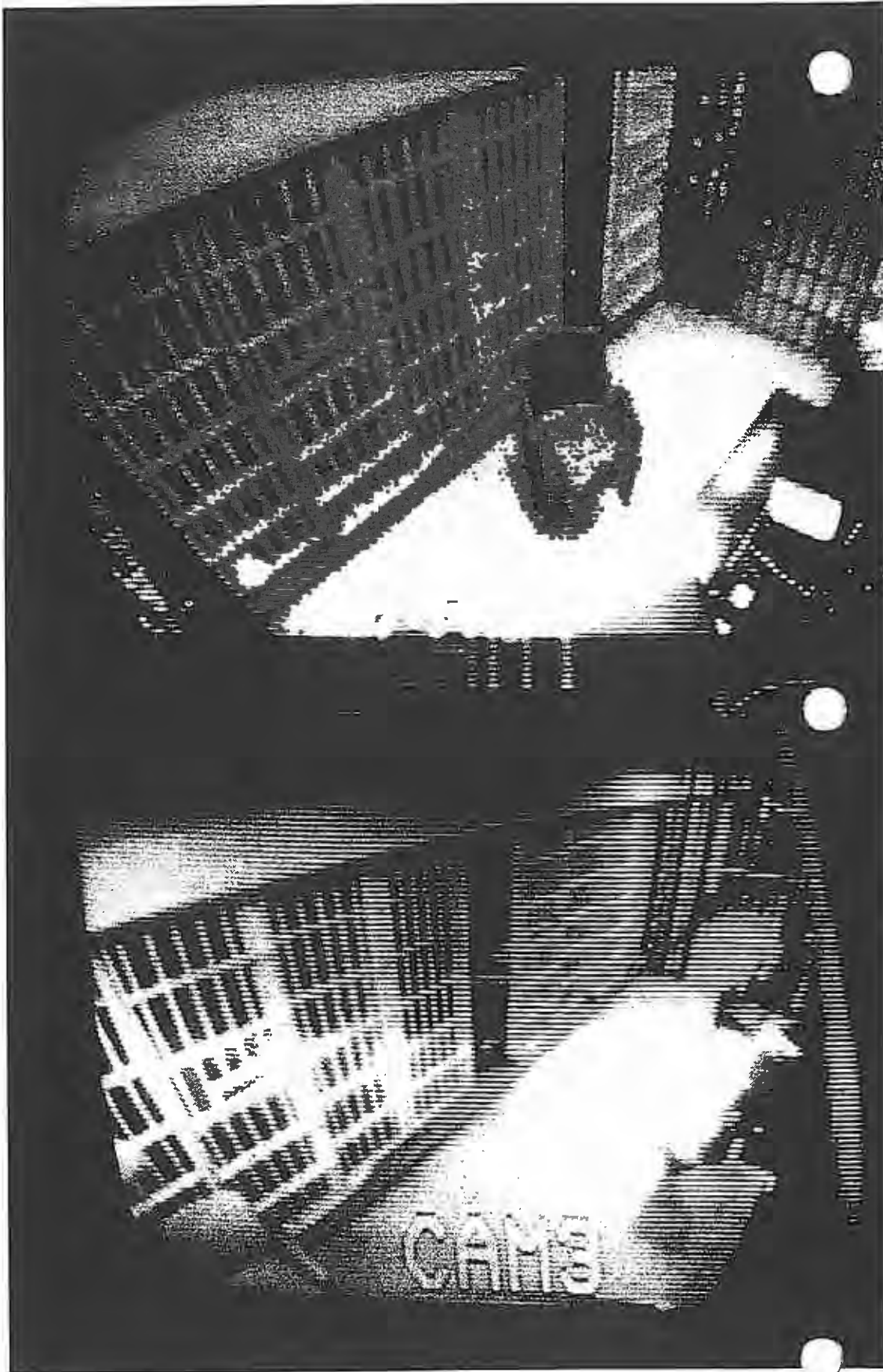
Some wore uniforms; others were civilians in business suits with graduate degrees and titles like "Assistant Commissioner, Assets Management." Glancing around the room, it quickly became apparent that the racial composition of this agency darkens as one descends the pyramid of power. The four top officials on the dais were white, while the managers they oversee were a racially mixed group. The populations these managers supervise—the city's prisoners and guards—include few whites. African Americans and Latinos make up 80 percent of the agency's staff and 92 percent of its prisoners.

Kerik's monthly meetings formed the centerpiece of his management strategy, a blueprint for leadership that he borrowed from the NYPD. Modeling his program on the NYPD's Compstat, Kerik called his version the "Total Efficiency Accountability Management System," or TEAMS. At these TEAMS meetings, Kerik quizzed wardens on topics ranging from the names of their jails' Latin Kings gang leaders to the temperature of their potato salad. Wardens who didn't have answers sometimes found themselves without jobs.

This morning it was Anthony Serra's turn. Serra, who was then the boss of Rikers' second-oldest jail, the North Infirmery Command, stood stiffly before a microphone in the middle of the packed room. Fraser began the questioning.

"You've had three slashings over the last two months," the chief said to Serra. "Can you tell me about them?"

The first incident occurred on May 29, up in housing area 6 South," Serra dutifully reported. "We had an inmate, Hop, who went to retrieve a cup from in front of the television. Other inmates were watching the television.





He blocked their view. They got mad at him. They didn't like his response when they confronted him, so they attacked him."

Serra continued his grim recitation, explaining that the second slashing occurred when one prisoner tired of another inmate shaking him down and urged friends to attack his extortionist. In the third incident, a Bloods gang member sliced the follower of a rival gang, the Five Percenters. To prevent further violence, Serra promised to erect more outdoor pens to separate his high-security inmates.

"Overall, you're doing a good job," Fraser said.

"Thank you, sir."

A few years ago, these interrogations didn't always go so smoothly. "I recall times in this agency when I asked [wardens], 'How many inmates do you have in your facility?'" Kerik said later. "And they didn't know. They'd have to get on the phone and call a captain." Such lapses infuriated the commissioner. "I'm not asking about brain surgery," he noted. "I'm asking about your job. You're supposed to know." One warden stumbled so badly that he lost his job before the meeting ended. In this jailhouse version of corporate America, fear is the ultimate management tool, a way for guards to control the prisoners, and for the agency's top officials to control their wardens.

The door to these meetings remained closed to outsiders back when wardens were fumbling basic questions. But today, violence on the island is at an all-time low, the door has swung open, and the parade of visitors is nonstop. Giuliani has sat on the dais next to Kerik. Prison officials from Hawaii, Singapore, and South Africa have observed these meetings. Vladimir Yalunin, who runs Russia's prison system, has visited. And on this morning, a few officials from the New Jersey state prison system filled chairs near the front. Rikers' sheer magnitude and notoriety make it a popular tourist attraction for out-of-town prison officials.

With so many visitors passing through, these question-and-answer sessions seemed to be as much about impressing outsiders as about monitoring wardens. By now, Kerik's managers had learned what questions to expect and usually spat back well-rehearsed responses.

The morning's only nerve-racking moment came shortly after John Basilone, then the warden of the Anna M. Kross Center, stepped behind the podium. With 2305 men in his jail, Basilone supervised a population larger than Maine's entire state prison system. Fraser glanced down at his copy of the wardens' report cards, stapled into a 60-page packet known as the "Primary Indicator Report." There aren't any A's or B's in these report cards, but there are plenty of monthly numbers designed to measure the wardens' performance, from how many of their prisoners escaped or hanged themselves to how many visited a hospital or got caught with a homemade shank.

Fraser grilled Basilone about his slashing statistics, then homed in on the number of times prisoners visited the jail's commissary, the muni-grocery store where popular purchases include Keebler cookies and Newport cigarettes.

"You had 5600 people from January to May go to commissary, and [in June] that figure doubled to 11,792," Fraser said to the warden. "Is that an accurate number? If so, tell me we're not having a riot or something."

"I believe the numbers have—" Basilone stopped. Everyone in the room waited. Finally, Basilone responded. "No, Chief."

"Listen, forget See GONNERMAN page 50

GONNERMAN from page 49

the answer," said Fraser, his voice growing louder and his cheeks redder. "This is something for everyone. When you see spikes [in your numbers] in certain areas, go see what's wrong. A spike in commissary is very critical because it can indicate a number of things, from an inmate strike to an inmate food boycott to a potential disturbance brewing. That's when people stock up on commissary, because they know they ain't going to be leaving their cells to eat."

"We had looked into this," the warden insisted. "We didn't have anyone hoarding." Fraser wasn't satisfied. "If 11,000 is accurate, then the 5600 number is not a good answer, because that means you didn't have sufficient stock [in the commissary]," the chief said. "You're lucky you didn't have more stabbings and slashings because, if I'm an inmate and I can't get anything, then I'm going to be a little upset. This is serious stuff, guys. Take it serious!"

Kerik announced a 15-minute break, and the crowd drifted toward the table in the back with trays of prisoner-made pound cake from Rikers' bakery. Two video monitors, which had shown charts and graphs during the wardens' interrogations, now flashed a revealing slogan: *Great players win games. Great teams win championships.*

Kerik invited his visitors into a back room. "There are five issues that inmates can really rally around to the point of a riot," he said. "One is commissary, one is visits, one is telephone, one is food, and one is mail." He explained that any disruption in these services—if the flow of letters stops or the phone lines go dead—could spark a rebellion. Analyzing statistics to figure out exactly how much hardship his prisoners would endure, Kerik seemed to have transformed the practice of punishment into an elaborate mathematical equation.

Despite the faltering of his last warden, the commissioner assured the visitors that his employees were excelling. Kerik's message was simple and seductive: He had regained control of Rikers with his version of corporate accountability—charts, statistics, intimidation. Indeed, Kerik has shrunk the number of stabbings and slashings by 93 percent in the last five years—an impressive accomplishment heralded by even his harshest critics.

But in a penal colony, even when there's good news, there's plenty of bad news, too. Over the three months I visited, two officers and two captains were arrested for beating an inmate and trying to cover up the assault. Three prisoners escaped. A guard committed suicide by flinging himself in front of a subway. At the same time, the Department of Correction was still reeling from a spate of news stories exposing sloppy medical practices, including charges that inmates had died because the city's handpicked health care provider was trying to cut costs by sending fewer patients to the hospital.

Like any statistics, Kerik's numbers told only part of the story of Rikers Island. The numbers that the Department of Correction doesn't collect may be just as revealing. Questions never asked at these management meetings include "How many of your prisoners are repeat visitors to the city's jails?" and "How many of the prisoners you released left with a referral to a drug rehab program?" In these low-crime times, Kerik's focus remained fixed on perfecting the art of jail management, not on improving services for the drug addicts and mentally ill people who stream back and forth over the Rikers Island bridge.

As I learned more about Rikers Island, in fact, the place began to resemble not so much an efficiently managed corporation as a city-run superghetto kept out of the public eye. Statistics don't tell the whole story, but they do suggest that just beneath New York's media-hyped boom lies a world of poverty, suffering, and chaos: About 30 percent of prisoners report they were homeless at some point within three months before they were locked up. Twenty-five percent receive some mental health services. Twenty percent of the women and 7 percent of the men are HIV-positive. And 90 percent are high school dropouts.

Statistics show that more than 80 percent of people arrested in Manhattan test positive for illegal drug use. Each year, the city's jails get about 130,000 admissions. Nobody knows exactly how many different people this number represents, but half have made at least one prior trip to a city jail within the last fiscal year. So many prisoners are Rikers regulars that guards welcome them by name when they arrive, and inmates congratulate the officers when they get promoted.

Three-quarters of the detainees in New York City's jails are locked up solely because they cannot afford bail. Perhaps the most revealing indicator of these prisoners' poverty is the fact that 42 percent have bails of \$1000 or less. For many thousands of them, a few extra hundred dollars is enough to determine if they live at home as their case goes through the courts—a process that can last anywhere from two days to occasionally more than two years—or wait, whether innocent or guilty, in a concrete cage.

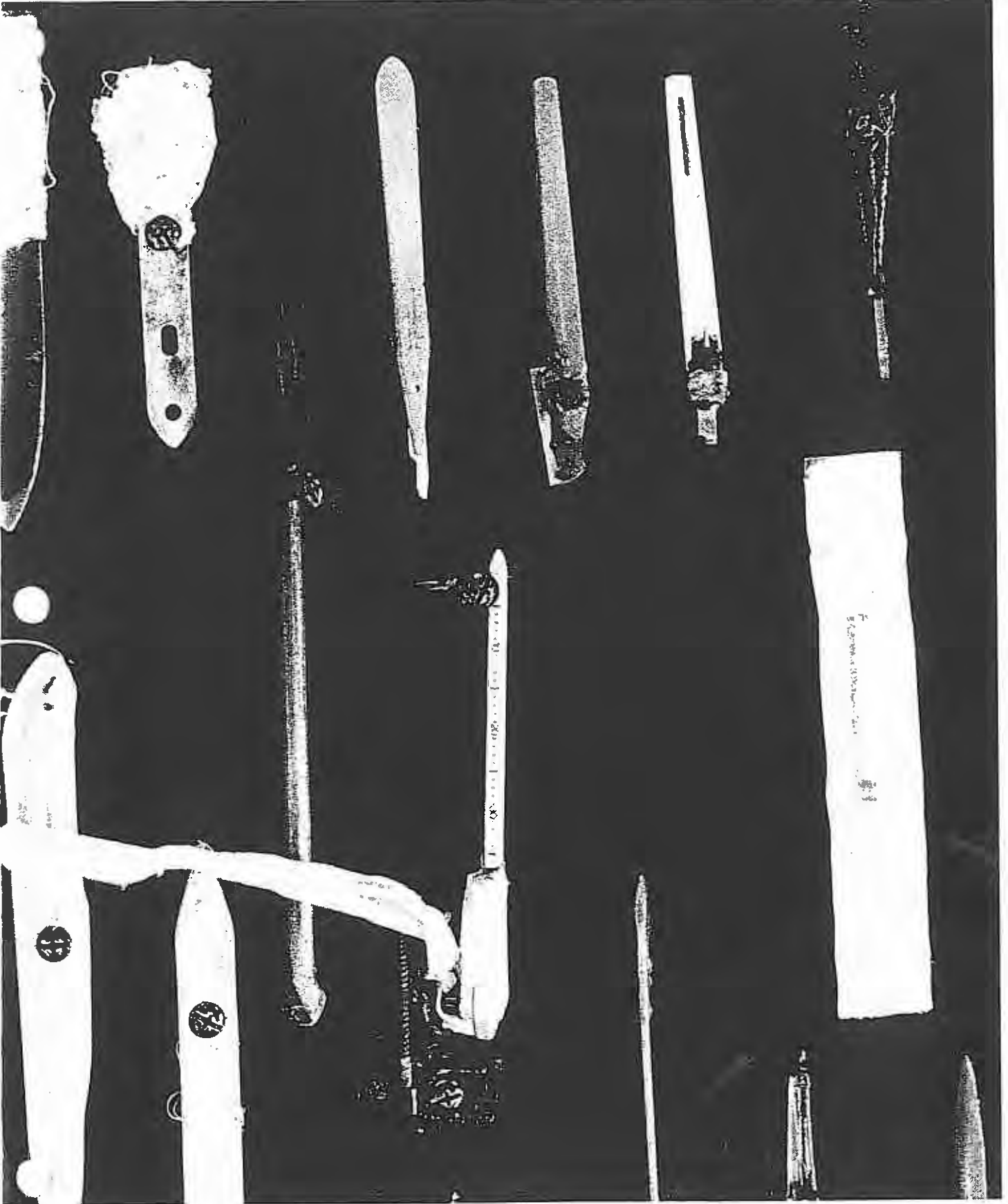
Inside Tier 3C

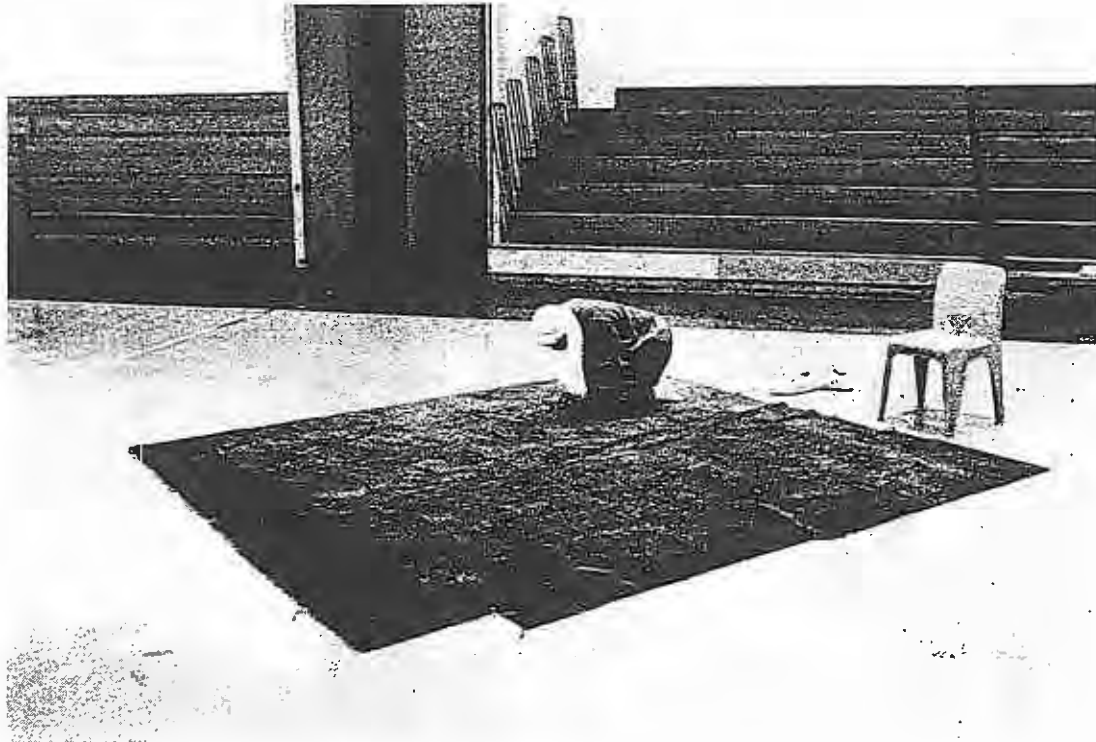
In the lobby of the North Infirmary Command, a five-story jail across the street from the commissioner's trailer, I dropped my driver's license in a metal drawer. The guard behind the glass pushed back a laminated pass. "Don't lose that thing," said Angelo Manzi, then the jail's deputy warden, as I clipped it to my shirt. "Or we'll have to find a place for you." He was joking, but not entirely. On Rikers, a misplaced visitor's pass triggers a facility-wide search; in a prisoner's hands, it could become a get-out-of-jail-free card.

The North Infirmary Command has only 446 beds, fewer than any other Rikers jails, but it is a magnet for journalists because it holds the "front-page folks," as Thomas Antenen, the Department of Correction's spokesman at the time, liked to call them. All stripes of celebrities have slept there, from David "Son of Sam" Berkowitz and Robert "Preppy Killer" Chambers to Reverend Al Sharpton and rapper Ol' Dirty Bastard of Wu-Tang Clan. Most inmates whose mug shots show up in the tabloids do their time at this jail, where they are kept apart from the rest of the prisoner population so guards can watch them closely.

Today, there were no boldfaced celebrities on Rikers. Ol' Dirty Bastard had been arrested two days earlier, but this time he'd paid his bail quickly. The best-known resident at the moment was Kenneth Kimes, who, with his mother, was convicted of murdering a Manhattan millionaire. (Later, after being shipped to an *See GONNERMAN page 52*







AN INMATE PRAYS DURING RAMADAN AT ROSIE'S, THE WOMEN'S JAIL.

GONNERMAN from page 51
upstate prison, Kirnes attracted national attention when he held a reporter hostage for more than four hours with a Paper Mate pen.)

For reporters, photographers, television producers, and cameramen who wanted to visit Rikers, Antenen was the gatekeeper. Until recently, when he followed Kerik to the NYPD, Antenen's job had been to spin for the city's jail system as its "Deputy Commissioner, Public Information." When a reporter heard that a prisoner had hanged himself or stabbed a guard or tried to swim to LaGuardia, Antenen got the call. His duties included sifting through media inquiries from as far away as Japan and Italy, memorizing the names of rap stars who are often arrested, and turning down all journalists who asked to spend a night in a Rikers cell.

I had been to the North Infirmity Command as a reporter twice in the last few years, and like almost every interview conducted on the island, mine were set up ahead of time, according to the agency's rules. I faxed a letter to Antenen. The prisoner signed a release. And on the appointed day, a guard escorted the inmate into a tiny room close to the jail's entrance, where I got one hour, maybe two, to ask questions. No strolling around the jail, no peeking inside the inmate's cell, no chatting with other prisoners. As Antenen liked to say, "We don't just let reporters go fishing among our inmate population."

But for this story, Kerik and Antenen made an exception. They had agreed to let me tour Rikers' jails as long as I had an escort. Or four. This morning, my presence seemed a matter of discomfort, since the jail's three highest-ranking officials, plus Antenen, had decided to act as my personal tour guides. I recognized one of them, Anthony Serra, from the recent meeting of Kerik's managers. Serra became a guard when he was 23, after toiling for three years as a dividends clerk on Wall Street. At 39, his buzz cut and stocky frame made him look less like a corporate climber than a marine, the job he held after high school.

We began our tour outside Tier 2C, where inmates pass the hours in their six-by-eight-foot cells or an attached cage, which functions as a mini-recreation room. The walls echoed with

the voices of talk-show hosts and cartoon characters. Serra stopped next to the first cage, home of his youngest prisoner.

"This inmate was involved in a murder in our adolescent facility," Serra said, gesturing at a sullen 17-year-old named John Alexander, who later pleaded guilty to second-degree manslaughter. "But because he's an adolescent, he gets this cubicle to himself. We run services just for him. We take him to recreation. We take him to the library. When he goes to school, he wears mitts, but not during school." On Rikers Island, "mitts" are black, foot-long tubes, closed at one end, which are locked onto the hands of especially violent inmates.

Alexander did not look up from his television as Serra described his predicament. After the teenager strangled fellow inmate Lance Gaston in January 1999, officials moved him to this cell. "Are you getting your GED?" Serra asked through the steel bars. The inmate nodded. "Are you going to pass?" He nodded again. "Have you taken any practice tests?" The teenager shook his head no. Serra encouraged him to study, then strode down the narrow cell block.

The forced falseness of the exchange reminded me, if I needed reminding, that the truth about daily life inside Rikers does not come out easily. Casual conversations, whether with inmates or guards, are almost impossible: careless remarks to a reporter can injure a career or plunge a prisoner into disfavor. The evidence is everywhere—including in the clenched jaw and darting eyes of a captain at the women's jail when I tried to chat with him about his job. "We can't talk to reporters," he said. "It's in our rule book." The pleading stares of prisoners as they passed me in the hall suggested they would scream out all their fears and frustrations if only a row of officers armed with pepper spray were not watching. In this sense, all prison reporting is a lie, and the best one may hope for is a set of half-truths or an unscripted moment that reveals what is supposed to remain hidden.

Next was Reginald Harris, who reclined in a plastic chair and stared at the window across the corridor from his cell. According to a print-out Serra carried on his clipboard, Harris escaped from a state facility in 1982 and was

caught with "escape-related" material while on Rikers in 1990. Over the years, he'd made three trips to state prison for weapons possession. I asked Harris what he did all day. He slipped off a pair of headphones and fixed his gaze on the crew of visitors outside his cage.

"I figure out ways to get out of jail," he said. Serra chuckled, but only for a moment.

"I've been coming to Rikers Island since 1968," said Harris, 49, dragging on a Newport. "I don't respect the law. I feel it's my right to be free. I've escaped three times—two times it was documented and once before they put in the computer system. I escaped in 1973, 1982, and I tried in 1990." What went wrong in 1990? "I had a map," said Harris, sounding rueful. "But I told the wrong person. I thought he wanted to be free."

Serra steered the group up a flight of stairs. On Rikers, most prisoners who flout the rules—who slash an enemy or punch a guard—get sent to one of five special punitive units nicknamed the "Bing." Inmates who are too notorious and dangerous for the Bing come to Tier 3C

Rikers prisoners refer to their home as 'the Rock,' but from an archaeological point of view it's more accurate to call this place a dump.

of the North Infirmity Command—where we were now. As we approached the entrance, Serra shouted, "On the gate!"

Glancing at his inmate roster, Serra pointed to Damon Barow's name. "He cut a C.O. [correction officer] while he was in [the Bing], so he's over here," Serra explained. Next was David Pannell. "He's a Five Percenter and he's at war with the Bloods," he continued. "The Bloods would love to do him any time they can." Steel mesh covers the cages on Tier 3C to prevent prisoners from slicing passersby. This precaution was especially helpful at the moment, since Pannell lived at the corridor's far end, while the prisoner in the first cell was Leonard "Deadeye" McKenzie, the leader of the Bloods.

Tier 3C's residents began hollering before we even stepped inside their cell block. "Every

time I come in here, they annoy me," said Serra, his smile now gone. "Someone had a gold bracelet and he refused to give it up. He swallowed the chain. And he stuffed a ring in his butt. I brought in the search team, and they refused to lock in [to their cells], so I had to get 'em

Officers pepper-sprayed the inmate into submission, but the memory of the confrontation still riled Serra. "Did you see *The Silence of the Lambs*?" he asked, referring to the way the Anthony Hopkins character, Hannibal Lecter, is cuffed, chained, and muzzled. "That's how I would like to do it. I'd love to put 'em on handcarts and just transport them."

Gossip columnists at the *New York Post* may not know Deadeye's name, but on Rikers Island he is an A-list celebrity. Deadeye, whose moniker refers to his one cloudy eye, cofounded the Bloods' New York City chapter on Rikers in 1993. Soon after, he boosted his notoriety by slamming an officer in the head with a 50-pound dumbbell. Now 32, Deadeye has been cycling through New York's jails since age 10, on charges ranging from selling cocaine to robbery to assault. His "pedigree card"—where officers scribble an inmate's security classification—states: "Must be accompanied by staff for every move. Highly assaultive."

"Hey, warden, why should I be subjected to no-contact visits with my family?" Deadeye shouted as we walked by his cell.

"It's for your own protection and the protection of the inmate population," Serra told him. "He's a little angry with me because I took away his contact visits," the warden whispered to me. "Now he visits through glass because I don't want anyone slashing him, and I don't want him slashing anyone."

With hundreds of followers, Deadeye is among Rikers' most powerful residents, part of the impetus behind Kerik's Gang Intelligence Unit. "When he arrived here," Serra said, "the very next day, I had a slashing in my yard between the Bloods and Five Percents for no other reason than the Bloods were showing off for the boss." Since then, Deadeye has given Serra too many headaches. "I let him know he may be the leader of the Bloods, but I'm the leader of the jail and I control him," Serra explained. "I tell him it could be peaceful, or we could go to war every day."

Serra's tour of Tier 3C ended in the hallway outside the cell block, next to a padlocked cabinet mounted on the wall. Inside, two rows of orange Bic razors hung behind a glass door. Prisoners are allowed a razor for a 15-minute shave each day. But if they refuse to return their Bic, the warden calls in his search team—guards in helmets and body armor, armed with batons and shields. As Serra finished, I counted the razors and jotted in my notepad: New 36, Used 13.

I realized a deputy warden had been mon-

itoring what I wrote when he blurted out: "Did you count 13?" Suddenly, the calm professionalism of the jailers gave way to quiet panic. A missing razor meant a search team and pepper spray. Everyone stared at my notes, then at the cabinet. The officials quickly counted the used blades. One, two, three, four . . . 14. I'd undercounted by one. The men relaxed.

Did You See Me on TV?

As paradoxical as it sounds, it's possible to be arrested on Rikers Island. This is one of the functions of the Gang Intelligence Unit, a squad of 111 guards who track gang members and each month arrest 80 to 100 prisoners, charges ranging from torching a mattress to juggling

See GONNERMAN page 54

GONNERMAN from page 52

in cocaine to stabbing a correction officer.

Today, two guards inside the George Mochan Detention Center were preparing to arrest a young man for having a small razor blade. Gregory Borges bent forward, lifted one leg of his jeans, and slid a 9mm gun into his ankle holster. A few feet away, his partner, Joseph Sanabria, pulled the Velcro straps of his stab-proof vest tight around his torso.

Emmanuel Bailey, then the assistant deputy warden in charge of this unit, strolled over. "You got your mits?" he asked his officers. "You got everything you need?" The mits arrived on Rikers a couple years ago, a new weapon in Kerik's campaign to seize control. Invented by a Nevada jail guard, the mits are supposed to deter inmates from wielding razor blades or picking their handcuff locks. Sanabria grabbed a pair off a table and headed for the door.

Before joining his officers to oversee today's arrest, Bailey showed me around his headquarters. There are 2100 alleged gang members in the city's jails, he explained, and his unit's main gangbusting tool is an elaborate computer-tracking system. Click a few times on a mouse in this room, and a gang member's life story pops up on the screen—his height, weight, home address, mother's name, most recent visitors, enemies, a photo of his tattoos.

The Bloods, Latin Kings, Netas, and Five Percenters are Rikers' largest gangs, but there are more than 50 others with names reflecting New York City's diversity, including the Chicano Nation, the Nigerian Express, the Trinitarians, the Jamaican Posse, and Dominican Power. As Bailey emphasized how well-trained and professional his unit was, a customized screen saver floated across one of his computer screens: *Gang Intelligence/Arrest Unit AKA Blood Hunter*.

The Gang Intelligence Unit is a favorite stop on any tour of the new-and-improved Rikers Island. For decades, a feeling of inferiority had hovered over Rikers Island, a sense that jail guards operated in the shadow of the NYPD. When the NYPD's crime-fighting feats became front-page news across the country a few years ago, Rikers' guards felt forgotten, neglected, snubbed.

Now the agency's leaders like to talk about how police officers from Brooklyn to Alaska are calling them for help, for tips on tracking down gang members or deciphering their codes. In his office, Bailey pointed to a framed picture of himself from the May 1999 issue of *POLICE*.

'I let him know he may be the leader of the Bloods, but I'm the leader of the jail and I control him,' Serra explained. 'I tell him it could be peaceful, or we could go to war every day.'

which hung on a wall next to his desk. "That's a real police magazine," he said, a grin spreading across his face. "And we made the cover." The assistant deputy warden likes to tell visitors about his appearance in an A&E documentary, and he beams when inmates mention they saw him on television.

A few minutes later, Bailey pulled out his most compelling prop, a gory mosaic of Polaroids showing prisoners minutes after they have been sliced. Taped to the center of his "victims board" were the weapons of choice among Rikers residents: paper-thin razor blades. Girlfriends slide blades to their inmate boyfriends while kissing in the visiting room, and friends mail them into the jails hidden inside the perfume-ad inserts of glossy magazines.

Sometimes razors arrive through the mail, addressed to unsuspecting prisoners. This is a favorite tactic of jealous men trying to move in on women after their boyfriends get



AT THE BEAUTY SALON: GETTING HER HAIR PRESSED AND CURLED MAY BE ONE OF THE ONLY STEPS A PRISONER CAN TAKE TO EXPEDITE HER RELEASE.

sent to jail. Sending blades to a jailed boyfriend is an attempt to get rid of him—to get him in trouble so he spends extra time on Rikers or, better yet, gets shipped off to a faraway prison.)

Like prisoners everywhere, Rikers inmates use their rectums as a sort of suitcase for weapons, concealing one or two razor blades—or sometimes even 20 or 30—by "slamming" or "boofing" them. They wrap the blades in matchbook covers, tie pieces of thread or string around the cardboard, and then shove the weapons up their rectums. Before Rikers officials banned Nike Aars, inmates hid blades in the sneakers' hollow chambers. And prisoners used Vaseline for slamming until officials made that item contraband too.

The dozens of photos tacked to Bailey's bulletin board showed prisoners on their backs, blood pooling around their heads and

"smiley." Cuts on the back, chest, or elsewhere on the body lack nicknames, since those targets are less desirable. "You get no points for the back of the head," Bailey said. "Any facial cut is a bonus area because you can never cover your face."

Bailey explained that the new weapon of choice is a scalpel, which is thinner than a razor blade and so less likely to set off a metal detector when stashed inside the rectum. Some assailants prefer the scalpel because it takes a second or two longer to feel its sting, just enough time to steal away unnoticed.

Now Bailey and I joined officers Sanabria and Borges outside, and we climbed into a Ford Taurus. We turned onto Hazen Street, the main road on Rikers, which curls around past most of the island's jails, and one minute later arrived at the Anna M. Kross Center, one of Rikers' largest facilities, which spreads over 40 acres. Long modular units added to the back of the jail make it look from above like a spider with its legs stretched out.

Sanabria stopped at the front entrance and ran in to drop off the officers' guns, which are banned inside jails lest an inmate grab one. As we rode around to the back of the jail, the investigators grew quiet, and in the backseat Borges nervously fingered the pair's walkie-talkies. "You can't fall asleep and start getting routine," he explained. "You have to remember anyone can be violent at any time."

Bailey and his two officers strode through the jail's intake area, past Pen #2, where nearly 40 men were crammed together in a space the size of a typical Manhattan living room, though its only furnishings were wooden benches and a toilet with no door. I estimated the temperature to be 90 degrees. The only fan blew from behind the officers' desk. The stench of sweat hung heavy in the air, as did an overwhelming sense of frustration and defeat.

Some of the inmates had just been arrested; others had been up since 4:30 a.m. and were returning from a day at court. Several jockeyed for a spot near the front of the pen, where they would be visible to the officers and perhaps less likely to be attacked. Next door, Pen #3 was inconspicuously empty, save for the leavings of its most recent inhabitants: blan-

kets, milk containers, a smattering of orange peels, one plastic slipper, half a roll of toilet paper, and one odorless puddle.

The inmates peered through their bars as Bailey strolled by. His uniform—a navy jacket with four gold buttons and a gold oak leaf pinned on each shoulder—announced his authority; the presence of an assistant deputy warden signaled that something out of the ordinary was about to happen.

The prisoners craned their necks to watch as a guard walked down the corridor toward the intake area, delivering German Gonzalez, a tall, slender inmate with a teardrop tattooed beneath his left eye. Gonzalez had been on Rikers for a couple weeks, ever since cops picked him up for selling heroin. He knew the island well. Like many addicts, he was a frequent visitor; over the past few years, he had made seven trips and spent a total of 398 nights in jail.

Counselors on Rikers Island used to help combat this cycling by easing the transition to post-jail life. They helped inmates navigate the maze of city agencies—sign up for food stamps, find a bed in a drug treatment program, track down a birth certificate to apply for Social Security, even re-enroll in high school. But over the last five years, the number of counselors in the city's jails has plunged from 105 to 11, and Rikers' revolving door continues to spin nonstop.

As Gonzalez entered the system this time, a guard accused him of having one razor blade in his pocket and another hidden in the sole of his sneaker. Possession of a razor blade is legal on the streets of New York City, of course, but carrying one onto Rikers Island can be a felony. Gonzalez looked more confused than menacing as Bailey and his two officers led the prisoner behind a plastic curtain. On Rikers, detainees wear their everyday clothes unless they get rearrested, and so the officers ordered Gonzalez to strip off his jersey and khaki shorts and climb into a slate-gray jumpsuit.

Gesturing to Gonzalez's cuffed wrists, the assistant deputy warden said, "I'm sorry about this."

"It's all right," said Gonzalez with a shrug. See **GONNERMAN** page 56

GONNERMAN from page 54

"Shit happens." He paused, then added, "Am I going to court?"

A guard told Gonzalez in Spanish that they were taking him to the 41st police precinct in the Bronx. Borges stuffed Gonzalez's clothes into a cotton sack, while Sanabria squamed to fasten a pair of clamps around the inmate's ankles. Bailey asked Gonzalez if he'd heard about the agency's new policy of arresting prisoners for crimes committed on Rikers Island.

"I've never been arrested, but I heard about it," Gonzalez said.

"Did you see me on TV?" Bailey asked. The prisoner looked puzzled, but he played along. "No," he said. "I didn't see you."

Forty pairs of eyes followed Gonzalez as the officers steered him past the holding pens toward the exit. The arrest seemed intended as much to send a message to the prisoners in Pen #2 as it was to punish Gonzalez. (Four months later, this case against Gonzalez would be dismissed.) The commissioner had told me that because the number of violent incidents had plummeted, Rikers inmates no longer needed weapons for self-defense, but when I asked the prisoner why he'd wanted a razor, he rolled his eyes and stared at me like I was crazy. "Because I got to protect myself," he said.

A Visit to Rosie's

By now, summer classes at the Rosewood High School had ended. The girls in the Rose M. Singer Center, or "Rosie's," where Rikers houses its female inmates, had to entertain themselves. So on this humid morning, four girls crowded around a table playing spades and swapping stories in a room with bare walls, one fan, and a long window looking onto a guards' station. The ringleader in cell block "6 Upper" was Mona Lisa, a saucy 17-year-old from Harlem.

She glanced at the cards in her hand and tossed a two of diamonds on the table. A cigarette swung from her lips as the teenager rattled off the reasons why life stinks inside the Bing, the jail's cell block for especially unruly prisoners. "In the Bing, you can't have an ashtray," Mona Lisa said. "You can't have cigarettes. You can't have a razor. The other thing about the Bing is you only get one shower a day."

Scattered around the room were nine other teenagers, who gossiped and braided each other's hair as a television blared *The Jenny Jones Show*. The audience in front of the television included the captain who had been assigned to escort me around the jail—a sign, I figured, that he wasn't too worried about what the girls might tell a reporter. Kenk's mur of Rikers' reforms does not include a stop inside cell block 6 Upper at Rosie's. Indeed, the women's jail, which has never had a problem with stabbings and slashings, does not fit neatly into Kenk's tale of dropping crime rates.

Today, the population at Rosie's includes 1600 adult women, 30 16- to 18-year-olds, and nine babies. After touring the men's jails on Rikers, strolling through Rosie's is a surprise: The entrance is painted pink, the fear of violence doesn't hang in the air, and most of the guards are female. Prisoners sometimes stroll arm-in-arm through the halls, and if they encounter a toilet with no seat, they'll stick down sanitary pads to create a cushion.

Pregnant inmates live together in a dorm called "Building 7," passing the days in a haze of cigarette smoke. And in the jail nursery, mothers push strollers around a patch of asphalt, chatting about the three new sets of twins or about which of them were shackled after they gave birth. In every part of Rosie's, the women debate a pet theory, that they get worse services than the men—that their food is less tasty, that they are told to use toilet paper instead of sanitary napkins when supplies run low—because they are less violent.

in cell block 6 Upper, the inmates' favorite

topic of discussion was the Bing, and the self-appointed authority was Mona Lisa. Short braids frame Mona Lisa's baby face, which might let her pass for 14 until she sashays around the cell block, drawing attention to her ample hips. Though this was Mona Lisa's first trip to Rikers, she already sounded like an old-timer, wearing her Bing time as a badge of honor. Mona Lisa said she'd arrived on Rikers three months earlier and had already spent 40 days in the jail's Bing, where inmates are locked in a room for 23 hours a day.

"You get a phone call once a week," she said. "You can't have no food in the Bing. Nothin' that we get up here. We don't go to commissary for soap, y'know, things you want. They call it toilet-bowl shopping," Mona Lisa said, referring to the inmate practice of storing

Like prisoners everywhere, Rikers inmates use their rectums as a sort of suitcase for weapons, concealing one or two razor blades—or sometimes even 20 or 30—by 'slamming' or 'boofing' them.

soda or perishable foods in a cell toilet. "In the Bing, we don't even go toilet-bowl shopping!"

What did Mona Lisa do to earn a trip to the Bing? "A girl threw pee on my bed because I didn't give her a cigarette, and I threw pee in her face," Mona Lisa said with a smirk. "She slapped me. A C.O. broke it up. Then I bear her up in the bathroom."

Male prisoners get sent to the Bing for offenses like attacking a guard or slamming razor blades, but female inmates receive the same punishment for less serious transgressions. According to the warden of Rosie's, female prisoners tend to go to the Bing for "fighting with each other, disrespecting staff, not following orders, lingering in the hallways... and stealing from each other." One of the few times an officer found a razor blade in this jail, the inmate was using it to sculpt her eyebrows.

Jennifer, 17, sat nearby, half listening to Jenny Jones and half watching her fellow inmates' card game. Jennifer's belly pushed against her T-shirt, evidence that she is among the 20 percent of Rosie's prisoners who are pregnant. Jennifer said she had been on Rikers for three months after being picked up in a drug sweep. Today, she looked sulky, but it was not morning sickness or the lack of air-conditioning that was troubling her.

"A girl in here just got jumped and had a miscarriage," she said. Two weeks had passed and Jennifer was still upset about how her friend's alleged attacker was treated. "She didn't go to the Bing or nothing," Jennifer said. "That's not right. She should be tried for attempted murder or murder."

"Yep." Evidently, everyone had already heard about the incident, and everyone agreed with Jennifer.

Mona Lisa steered the conversation to another girl they all knew. "You know Cheryl, right?" she asked. (This inmate's name has been changed.) "She has to stay in the Bing until 2003. She was fighting C.O.'s, captains. She walks around with the black mits on her hands. She even has a lawsuit because they beat her. She's 18." A sense of awe crept into Mona Lisa's voice as she recounted Cheryl's troubles. "Everybody in here knows her." Mona

See GONNERMAN page 59

GONNERMAN from page 56

Lisa said. "She's famous in here."

"She gets sprayed with mace and she just keeps on going," another girl added.

The card game ended, and Mona Lisa scribbled down the scores. "This is my case right here," she said, pointing to the top sheet of a stapled stack. Mona Lisa explained that an adult inmate in the law library had helped her photocopy these descriptions of the penal codes for the charges she faces. The crime listed on the first page: 120.10 Assault in the First Degree. "I was reading it because when we get in the courtroom, I don't be understanding what they're saying," Mona Lisa said. Her fellow players—Christina, Ruby, and Desiree—all nodded in agreement, although no one else wanted to discuss why she was on Rikers Island.

There did not seem to be much to do other than keep playing cards, so the girls dealt a new hand. To pass the hours, they also bickered and fought. They traded tips on how to make an ashtray out of a soap bar and how to make an envelope using paper and toothpaste. They complained about everything—about the cops who arrested them, their prosecutors, the jail-house soap that made their skin crack. And they talked about how they were never, ever going to come back here.

Mona Lisa's strategy for combating boredom seemed to involve talking compulsively. "I never would have gone to the Bing," she continued. "But, you know, I've been here a long time, and you can go and tell a C.O. that this person is doing this and they never say nothing. And then when you take mazers into your own hands, you go to the Bing. I don't like that."

"We're all different ages, but some of us are more mature than others," explained Desiree, perhaps as a way to counter Mona Lisa's Bing tales. "Some of us know how to get along better than others do." Desiree said she'd been on the island for only three days, but already she had compiled a lengthy list of grievances. "The food is really disgusting," said Desiree. "That's what we got to talk about. And the way the C.O.'s talk to us—that's another thing that's really disgusting. They curse at us, especially in new admissions. They be treatin' you like shit, [saying] 'Shut the fuck up.'"

The captain in the corner remained out of earshot, and Desiree seemed unbothered by his presence. Unlike adult prisoners I had met, these girls had little fear about saying what was on their minds.

"And people that get dope sick—" Desiree continued. "You shouldn't do dope, but the C.O.'s act like it's [the addicts'] fault. If they see somebody having a seizure, they leave them there."

"Somebody could die in here because they take their time," said Mona Lisa.

"You know what I think is so nasty?" said Ruby, glancing up from her cards. Wearing a denim miniskirt and green metallic nail polish, Ruby looked as if she could have been heading out to a party. "Say she just came into new admissions," said Ruby, gesturing to the girl next to her, "and I've been here already. [The medical staff] haven't checked her, but they've checked me. And they chain me to her when we go to court. That's nasty because you don't know what she's got. She could be somebody off the streets. She could have TB or something."

"We're not supposed to get handcuffed to anyone because we're adolescents," said Mona Lisa. "They're supposed to put you by yourself in a cage," another teenager added.

A pudgy girl sitting behind Desiree leaned forward to join the conversation. "I don't like the cages," she said, "because I feel like I'm an animal in the Bronx Zoo."

At 11:15 a.m., Desiree, Mona Lisa, Ruby, and Christina pushed back their chairs and stacked their cards on the table. On the back of each playing card was a helpful message: *Play it safe. AIDS can happen to anyone.* The girls drifted out of the dayroom and lined up against a wall, ready to be marched to the mess hall.

By now, they had stopped gossiping and joking and smiling. Already, they'd mastered this monotonous drill: the excitement of learning to navigate this new world had quickly ebbed.

A few hours later, I visited the jail's Bing for adolescents. An officer let me into an empty eight-by-10-foot cell, and I tried to imagine how Mona Lisa's youthful enthusiasm had been such a small space. Then I spied her bunk, a cot covering one cinder-block wall:

Shay & Mona Lisa 4Ever One Bloody Face & Mona Lisa Blood Shai & Mo-Love 9Stop 1Love 4Ever In Life

It could have been a high school bathroom stall. I thought—until I noticed that some young prisoner had sketched a calendar by the door and drawn a slash through each day of captivity.

Beauty Tips for Prisoners

Petra Cirino laid her scissors on the counter and watched her customer wipe at the snips of hair clinging to her sweaty face. "I feel like a new woman," said Frances Burgos, stroking her stylish bob. Petra beamed. When not locked up on Rikers Island, Petra cuts hair in her Spanish Harlem apartment, charging up to \$50 a head. Today, she was working as a hairdresser at Rosie's, getting lots of love from her fellow inmates but earning only \$12 a week.

My captain-escort dropped me off here one afternoon and didn't bother to stick around. Decorated with ripped leather chairs, the salon had scant amenities: no glossy magazines, no manicures, no colorings. But the beauty parlor did boast two hot presses, honey-and-almond shampoo, four sinks, pink cinder-block walls, and Petra's considerable skills—beautifying her clients while masking the scars of their pre-prison lives.

Nowhere may a beauty salon be more needed than inside the women's jail on Rikers Island. The women here appear to be in far worse shape than the men—more sickly, more beaten-up, more defeated. Stances in which they are more likely to be HIV-positive and mentally ill. Black eyes and bruises are ungering reminders of abusive boyfriends and husbands on the outside. And some women appear only half alive, zombies passing the weeks in a Thorazine stupor. More men have their rap sheets written on their faces—the half-healed scar of a buck-fifty, say—but the women here also carry the scars of lives hard-fought.

Petra has encountered so many disfigured heads on Rikers Island that she adapted her hair-cutting routine for the prisoner clientele. "Before I start with anyone," she explained, "I ask, 'What do you want? Do you have any scars? Do you have any place you don't want me to touch?'" Even with her ample experience, Petra's newest client posed a challenge. Frances had an uneven scalp, a fact she revealed by pushing aside a lock of wavy hair near her crown, exposing a smooth, bald spot the size of a quarter.

"I've got a big dent because I've got a plate in my head," said Frances, who was 28 years old and had four children. "I was seven months pregnant when I got shot five years ago. I was an innocent bystander on a street in Brooklyn." Frances finished her story by lifting her lime green shorts, showing the foot-long scars that crawl up the inside of each thigh.

Every day, a few dozen prisoners visit this windowless room. To get a hair appointment, inmates must jot their names on a sign-up sheet those going to court the next day jump to the top of the list. Fifteen minutes in a chair at this beauty parlor represents a chance for a woman to improve not only her appearance but also her odds of going home a little sooner.

"I really wish I could go to court tomorrow," said an inmate accused of selling crack, as she admired her freshly cut hair.

See GONNERMAN page 62

GONNERMAN from page 59

ror. "I would look proper in front of the judge and the D.A., to let them know I'm starting to make a change." For a prisoner with no bail money and an impossible-to-reach public defender, getting her hair pressed and curled may be one of the only steps she can take to expedite her release.

As she moved around her salon, the hairdresser dragged one leg. When I asked Petra about her own scars, she rolled up her pants. "I don't have a kneecap," explained Petra, 42, glancing down at a leg that appeared eaten away, gnarled scar tissue replacing once smooth skin. "Thirteen years ago, I fell off a motorcycle. I was in a wheelchair for a year, then four years until I was off crutches," Petra paused. "I'm always in pain," she added.

Petra's job helped her forget that this was her fifth trip to Rikers, that she'd already done one bid in state prison on a drug-selling charge, that she might soon have to make another trip upstate. To land a job cutting hair at Rosie's this summer, Petra did not have to submit a résumé.

At Rosie's, the women's jail, prisoners sometimes stroll arm-in-arm through the halls, and if they encounter a toilet with no seat, they'll stick down sanitary pads to create a cushion.

or endure a series of interviews. She came in as a customer on a recent day and, frustrated by long wait, picked up a pair of clippers and fixed her own hair.

"She did a good job, and I said, 'We might as well put you to use,'" said John Nance, the 53-year-old barber who has overseen the salon for 11 years. Like any manager, he knew how hard it was to find good employees. "We have to fire a lot of them because they don't want to obey orders," Nance said of his inmate stylists. "But we give them one week's notice."

Over the years, Nance has heard the stories of hundreds of inmates, and along the way he's developed strong opinions about the criminal justice system. "A lot of girls are here that shouldn't be here," said Nance, who cuts hair at his own barber shop in Queens after he gets off work at Rosie's. "They constantly come in, over and over. I don't understand it. It's mostly drug addicts in here."

Though the barber tries to forget about the jail's grim procession of junkies when he leaves each day, the women's stories have inspired him to do his part to stop Rikers' revolving door. He and his wife adopted two children born to a drug-addicted mother. "That's two I'll keep from here," Nance explained.

As the salon's 3 p.m. closing time neared, the day's last customers trickled out the door and the hair dryer's noisy hum stopped. "I don't get paid that much here," Petra said, as she checked her supply of shampoo and cleaned her clippers. "But it's relaxing to me. I'm doing something I do on the street, so I feel a little freer." At the officer's desk by the door, the hairdresser traded her tools—her scissors, comb, trimmers, and clippers—for her inmate ID card. The guard frisked Petra, and prisoner #5617359J limped back to her cell.

In Captain Grillo's Garage

razor counting and gang tracking fail to keep the prisoners under control, Rikers' leaders descend on a garage located next door to

the car wash on the island's north side. Antenen, the jail's spokesman, brought me here one afternoon and pressed the buzzer by the entrance. A door rose, revealing a cavernous warehouse. Equipment climbed the walls and spread across the floor—stacks of riot helmets, toolboxes, a circular saw, fire extinguishers, Kevlar vests, hoses, a forklift, a pipe wrench, spit masks, wooden batons, plastic shields, mits, and life preservers.

Captain James Grillo beamed when he discovered Antenen and I had come to check out his workplace, the garage holding all the equipment for the Emergency Services Unit. Depending on whom you ask, the ESU, or "boom squad," is a group of dedicated officers with the toughest job on the island or a bunch of testosterone-fueled thugs who get a rush from brawling with the inmates. ESU guards break up riots, search cell blocks, and haul uncooperative inmates out of their cells.

The ESU employed only 16 guards when Grillo became its training captain seven years ago. Then Kerik arrived and expanded the ESU to 111 officers. At the same time, Kerik quadrupled the amount of money the Department of Correction spent on security equipment—a three-year budget of \$2.5 million from 1993 to 1995 escalated to \$10.1 million from 1996 to 1998. With every extra million dollars, trucks packed with shiny new weapons and other assorted high-tech gizmos arrived at Grillo's garage.

As the U.S. prison population has exploded in recent years, so has the number of companies marketing products to jail officials, creating a multimillion-dollar industry. Grillo tests many of the latest products in this garage, transforming it into his own personal laboratory as he tries to discover new and better ways both to protect guards and control prisoners.

The captain began our tour by grabbing a Plexiglas shield with a battery pack on the back and silver wiring across the front. He planted his feet. "C'mon! Out of your cell!" Grillo shouted, showing the shield toward an imaginary inmate. "We're not going to use force. But this shield gives off 50,000 volts!" The captain flicked a switch, and bright blue sparks of electricity shot across the quarter-inch-thick piece of plastic. A loud crackling sound followed. "Most of the inmates will comply," Grillo explained. "They don't want to get shocked."

Stun shields first arrived on Rikers Island in 1997, with the promise that both guards and inmates would suffer fewer bruises and broken bones. Behind this notion was the theory that the shield would scare prisoners into submission—not because a guard pressed it against their flesh, but because the mere sight of the sparking shield would transform inmates into Pavlovian dogs, who would quickly learn to exit their cells meekly rather than get zapped and dragged out by angry guards. By this measure, the agency's 90 shields—bought at \$545 a piece—have been effective.

But, of course, some inmates do get shocked. For these obstinate prisoners, an instructor's guide provides helpful pointers: Aim for the back, arms, legs, and buttocks. Don't aim for the eyes, testicles, scrotum, throat, spine, open wounds, or pregnant stomach.

In the beginning, the biggest hurdle to the shield's effective use was not Amnesty International, but the guards' umidity. "The officers didn't want to hit the inmates with the shield—with all the oversight agencies we have," Grillo said. "The inmate just got one little crack. It wasn't intimidating enough." Grillo had the shield's battery pack rigged so the officer can no longer zap prisoners for only a second or two. Now every switch of the shield triggers a six-second shock of 50,000 volts.

Grillo disappeared for a moment, then returned cradling a sleek object resembling a video camera. "I want to show you something else," he said. Across the room, one of Grillo's officers. See GONNERMAN page 65

GONNERMAN from page 62

officers pressed his hand against a metal door, then stepped away. Through the lens, I could make out a grainy black-and-white picture of his handprint. This device, called NightSight, uses technology originally marketed to the military to help soldiers track their enemies.

A handful of prisoners escape from the city's jails each year, and the list of successful strategies is long and varied. Three inmates stole an officer's Oldsmobile and drove over the bridge in 1980. Several prisoners have managed to swim to LaGuardia, while others have been pulled down by the bay's vicious tides. And in 1999, an inmate escaped by clinging to the bottom of a truck.

Each missing person triggers an enormous manhunt. Now, instead of prowling around the island's leafy areas or climbing through dirt to check under modular housing units, the guards can use NightSight. "This picks up body heat," Grillo explained. "It's totally incredible. A few years ago, we were looking for a guy in a field, and we found a couple eggs from a goose!"

To Grillo, the device represented a vote of confidence from his boss. "If it weren't for Kerik, I wouldn't have this, because this is \$13,000," said Grillo, rubbing his prized acquisition. "When I decided on this, he said, 'OK, you got it, buddy.' We bought one for each boat, and for the patrol vehicle, and the handheld one." A mischievous grin crept across the captain's face. "Now I got to butter him up to see if I can get \$13,000 for something else," he said.

And yet, Grillo's garage does not contain all of the most expensive equipment purchased by the Department of Correction. In 1997, a new type of metal detector, the Body Office Security Scanner, known as the BOSS chair, arrived on Rikers. Instead of walking through the detector,

A handful of prisoners escape from the city's jails each year, and the list of successful strategies is long and varied. Once three inmates stole an officer's Oldsmobile and drove over the Rikers Island bridge.

inmates must sit on it. The \$4500 chair beeps if a prisoner has any type of metal inside him—handcuff keys, razor blades, shanks.

Officer Brian Kirk walked over to join his boss's show-and-tell tour as Grillo picked up one of his least expensive weapons, an eight-foot metal pole with a crossbar near the center and a U-shape at one end, which looked like it could pass for a medieval torture tool. The two men seized the crossbar, lifted the pole parallel to the ground, and jabbed it into the gut of an invisible prisoner. If an inmate is armed with a homemade weapon, they explained, the device puns him against a wall.

Grillo moved on to another favorite piece of equipment: riot vests. The Department of Correction would later award a \$4.8 million contract to purchase 11,000 vests for jail guards. Kirk slipped on one of the half-inch-thick vests, and Grillo inspected it as if he were a football coach checking his players' equipment before a big game. "It came without the shoulder pads," Grillo explained. "Then we had an officer stabbed in the shoulder, so we had them add shoulder pads."

Next on Grillo's tour was a 36-inch wooden baton, which looked like it could have

been hanging from a cop's waistband. The captain grabbed the baton and lunged forward. "You always aim lower than the throat," he said. "And you can use it to lock the guy's arms back." Grillo dropped the wooden baton and picked up a shorter, sleeker version known as a Celayaton. "That's the same thing they use in these third-world countries where they do a lot of caning," Kirk explained. A sucker on the Celayaton stated "Made in Indonesia."

Grillo grew animated as he described how—armed with a Celayaton instead of an old-fashioned wooden baton—a guard can bang an inmate without breaking his bones. "This is new technology," he said. "It's a non-lethal weapon. If you are starting to have a problem with an inmate, you may not be able to mace him. Now you have another alternative. Everything is nonlethal. We hope to keep things that way. Unless they escalate..."

By this time, Antenen had left the garage and was outside making calls on his cell phone. I figured he would not be pleased to hear this last bit of Grillo's monologue. The captain could not seem to stop himself, to hide his enthusiasm for a job that outsiders might think borders on the barbaric. As if to combat such a judgment, and to emphasize the importance of all the equipment cluttering his garage, Grillo recalled his earlier days on Rikers.

"When I was in HDM [House of Detention for Men] in 1986, we had guys with their throats cut, guys with their ears cut off," said Grillo, who became a jail guard in 1973. "It was a regular bloodbath. It was the worst jail on Rikers Island, and I was the deputy warden in charge of security. Morale was terrible. All day long we were fighting."

Today, there are fewer than a dozen snarlings and slashings a month on Rikers Island. But Grillo believes in being prepared. Perhaps the best evidence of his attitude was the armored personnel carrier parked in front of his garage. In recent years, Grillo has purchased enough military equipment to outfit a small army—two armored personnel carriers, a crash truck, and a 125-foot boom crane from the German military.

The captain says this equipment is for "when there is a serious incident on Rikers Island." But these vehicles' true purpose seemed more to do with giving guards another way to remind the prisoners who runs Rikers. Officers bring the crash truck to respond to minor disturbances in the jail yards. Like grade-school kids infatuated with go-karts, they joke about driving the tanks along the streets of Rikers in the middle of the night.

Perhaps this is the perfect snapshot of post-Cold War America: plenty of leftover military equipment and no one to fear except our own prisoners. After spending countless hours obsessing about the finer points of body armor and riot vests and stun shields, Grillo was eager to try out his purchases. But what "serious incidents" have actually required the use of his armored personnel carriers and boom crane and crash truck? "We haven't had anything," Grillo said. "It's killing me it's been so quiet."

Bing Days

An officer pushed a metal food cart into the Bing and parked it in front of cell #1. Unlocking the door's slot, the guard shoved a tray of food inside. Before he could shut the slot, however, the occupant of cell #1 thrust his arm out the door. He had spied me outside his cell and begun hollering. "I want to talk to her!"

"Move your arm out of the food slot," said the officer, who kept one hand on the heated cart stocked with dozens of lunches.

"I got things to address!" the inmate shouted.

It was "feeding time" in cell block 1 South in the Bing, the most soul-deadening place on Rikers Island. On Rikers, there are five separate Bings, or punitive segregation units—for men.

See GONNERMAN page 67

GONNERMAN from page 65

women, adolescent girls, adolescent boys, and mentally ill inmates. But when people refer to "the Bing," they usually mean the men's unit, officially called the Central Punitive Segregation Unit, which occupies a five-story addition to the Otis Bantam Correctional Center. This 2000-bed jail is one of Rikers' newest, a high-tech facility with prefab cells and sliding doors operated by switches in a central control room. From the outside, the slate-colored building with bright blue trim bears little resemblance to Rikers' older jails.

The Bing was created in 1988 as a management tool, a place to put all the most rebellious prisoners together in order to make the rest of the city's jails run more smoothly. Today, two-story cell blocks run along each side of the Bing, creating the illusion that it is an airy, spacious place. But from inside its 72-square-foot cells, of course, the place looks quite different.

On this day, Rikers' jail-within-a-jail held 269 men, who spend all day alone, locked inside rooms just big enough to spread their arms

In recent years, Grillo has purchased enough military equipment to outfit a small army—two armored personnel carriers, a crash truck, and a 125-foot boom crane from the German military.

or walk a few steps. Unlike inmates elsewhere on Rikers, these prisoners exit their cells only for a shower or "recreation," which is an hour alone in an outdoor cage. There are no televisions, no visits to the law library, no chances to gossip in the mess hall. The primary occupation of the men here seems to be the struggle to stay sane.

Showing me around the Bing this morning were Leroy Grant, the warden of the Otis Bantam Correctional Center, and Angelo Rivituso, then the deputy warden in charge of the Bing. Grant is 6-5, with a basketball player's build and the sort of imposing presence that seems to befit a Bing warden. At the moment, Grant did not look pleased that the occupant of cell #1 had interrupted his tour, creating chaos in front of a guest.

"What's the problem?" asked Grant, who wore a navy jacket with four gold buttons, a black tie, and one gold star on each shoulder.

"It's a pleasure to see someone in authority by here," the inmate said.

"Y'all right?" Grant asked. "Take your arm out."

The inmate did not deliver a litany of gripes. Not about today's lunch of steamed carrots, spaghetti with meat sauce, white bread, and Kool-Aid, nor about anything else. What he wanted, it seemed, was a little attention. "Can I have your business card?" he asked the warden.

Grant ignored this stab at humor, but he'd already given the inmate what he wanted. The inhabitant of cell #1 pulled his arm inside, and the officer shut his food slot.

Mealtimes are the most chaotic periods of the day in the Bing, sometimes dragging on for two hours. Almost every day, someone shoves an arm—or occasionally even his head and shoulders—out of his slot. Prisoners scream all day long, but they know the best way to get a response is to hold a one-arm protest during mealtime.

Sometimes, inmates have a legitimate grievance—an illness, a missed weekly phone call, a suicidal urge. Sometimes, they just want

to taunt their jailers. For men locked in their cells all day, mealtime brings not only food but also a chance to get a tiny taste of power. In this setting of extreme isolation, putting an arm through a food slot can seem like a desperate grab for recognition.

The occupant of cell #2 tossed his overcooked carrots into the hallway before the guard could lock his slot. If more than one prisoner at a time refuses to let the officer shut his food slot, the guard halts his midday routine. The mantra for maintaining control in the Bing is "Two slots, everything stops." It takes only two inmates to dangle their arms out of their cells, the deputy warden explained, before "food is flying." Prisoners fling veal patties and apples across the cell block, and they squirt shampoo bottles filled with urine and Kool-Aid at officers passing by. Sometimes, female guards even encounter prisoners trying to masturbate on them through an open food slot.

To regain control, Bing officers are supposed to follow a strict protocol. "After we exhaust all our IPC [interpersonal communication] skills," Grant explained, "then we have to bring in the officers with the stun shields and OC [oleoresin capicum, or pepper spray] and get him to comply." Getting the prisoner to comply often means performing a "cell extraction"—entering an inmate's cell, forcing him facedown onto the ground, cuffing him behind his back, and hauling him out.

A typed document, known as the "24-Hour Report," circulates around Rikers each morning, detailing these incidents and any other "use of force." Between July 1998 and July 1999, there were 496 use-of-force incidents in the Bing, including this typical incident from May 29, 1999:

At 1225 hours, in 1 South Cell 27, Inmate Malik . . . refused repeated orders to close his food slot. . . . Under the supervision of Captain Lomas, Officers Malone (E.I.S. [Electronic Immobilization Shield]), Wilson (Legs), Evans (Right Arm), Hill (Left Arm), and Guzman (Handcuffs) restrained Inmate Malik with a 6 second application of the E.I.S., control holds, and the application of handcuffs; and removed him from the cell. Inmate Malik refused medical treatment and no injuries were noted. No injuries were reported by staff.

Jail officials and their critics agree that the use of stun shields and pepper spray has led to a drop in the number of broken bones and bruises in the Bing. But some prisoners do still get hurt. During May and June of 1999, Bing inmates were injured in about half of the 129 use-of-force incidents. Their injuries ranged from a scratched arm and a swollen wrist to broken teeth, multiple contusions to the face and nose, and an asthma attack triggered by pepper spray.

There are far fewer serious injuries in the Bing today largely because of a class-action lawsuit brought by the Legal Aid Society in 1993. This suit exposed rampant abuse, revealing that between 1988 and 1998 guards seriously injured at least 300 Bing inmates. Broken bones, perforated eardrums, and fractured skulls were fairly common here several years ago.

Perhaps the most damning document collected in this lawsuit was a report prepared for the Legal Aid Society by Vincent M. Nathan, who has been a court monitor in prison reform litigation cases for more than 20 years. Nathan wrote:

The CPSU [Central Punitive Segregation Unit] occupies the third ring of hell in the field of corrections in the United States. Staff behavior in this highly secure unit is . . . psychopathic behavior. Not only do officers respond to any form of aggression with punches and kicks, they actively seek out their victims and punish them brutally for verbal insults and insubordination; staff inflict "greeting beatings" to es-

See GONNERMAN page 68

GONNERMAN from page 67

tablish their turf or, perhaps in some cases, just for sheer perverted pleasure. . . . CPSU supervisors, including wardens, have deliberately adopted terror as their underlying management philosophy.

As part of their settlement with the Legal Aid Society, Rikers officials added 300 cameras to the Bing and now document every cell extraction. To show how he monitors his guards, Rivituso, the deputy warden, led me into his air-conditioned office on the Bing's third floor, where he kept a jalapeno popper, a jar of homemade pickled jalapeno peppers, and a stash of videotapes depicting his officers wrestling inmates out of their cells.

A bulletin board across from Rivituso's desk featured a row of Polaroids of the Bing's worst inmates. The most notorious one was a 22-year-old Blood named Peter Showers. Grant pulled out a two-page list of Showers's infractions: refusing to have his cell searched, assaulting staff, threatening inmates, arson.

Mealtimes are the most chaotic periods of the day in the Bing. Almost every day, someone shoves an arm—or occasionally even his head and shoulders—out of his food slot.

When Showers comes to Rikers, officers do not wait for him to break Rikers' rules again; he goes straight to the Bing.

I was not permitted to interview Showers or any of the other prisoners in the Bing. So I asked to speak with an inmate who worked in the Bing, one of the men who held the job of "suicide prevention aide." What I got was an interview with Samuel, an affable 40-year-old with a missing front tooth, who had been locked up for 10 months on a cocaine possession charge. Samuel and I stood next to the "bubble," the glass-enclosed control room outside the cell block, as he told me about his job.

"I watch the inmates to make sure they're not attempting to injure themselves or commit suicide," he explained. "If an inmate is attempting to hang up, I contact an officer. Then I lift the inmate up so the noose is no longer around his neck, and the officer cuts him down. If the inmate is cutting [himself] up, I'm to stand outside the cell and wait till the officer comes to disarm the inmate. I'm supposed to make, like, a tourniquet or a patch press to slow down the bleeding." Samuel demonstrated by pushing his palm against the inside of his wrist. "Or stop the bleeding, if I'm lucky," he said.

Samuel is one of several suicide prevention aides who patrol the Bing, earning 50 cents an hour to peer inside cell windows and make sure none of their fellow inmates are trying to kill themselves. "A lot of guys—they have a very hard persona, but you get talking to them and they're just young guys," said Samuel, who is older than most of the inmates in the Bing, where the average age is 23.

"They're just followers, following what's hot right now," he continued. "A lot of times, guys lose hope, especially guys who are facing a lot of time. Their wives are leaving them, their girlfriends are leaving. I try to reassure them that even people who are not in prison, their relationships go south for whatever reason, and that's just a part of life."

So far, nobody has tried to hang himself on

Samuel's watch. He'd been a suicide prevention aide for only a month, working the 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. shift, but already all the prisoners seemed to know him, or at least know his voice. If he showed up a few minutes after 10 p.m., the inmates chided him for being late.

Samuel's current job could not be different from the last one on his résumé: manager at the Warner Bros. store in Times Square, supervising workers as they lined the shelves with Tweety Bird T-shirts and Bugs Bunny drinking glasses. In an unexpected way, though, Samuel said, his stint at Warner Bros. helped prepare him for his current position, since they're both "standing-type jobs."

As Samuel spoke, the warden stood a few feet away, monitoring all of his words. Perhaps to placate the warden, Samuel adopted a demeanor of complete deference. He kept his hands clasped behind his back, as if he were wearing a pair of invisible handcuffs. When Samuel finished his spiel, the warden stepped forward. "His role is very significant," Grant said. "A lot of guys feel loneliness and a sense of despair. He can go over to them and let them know they're not the only ones going through this. He plays a vital role helping them cope." Samuel stayed silent as the warden spoke, and soon an officer came to lead him away.

Grant and Rivituso escorted me out of the Bing and past the "staging area"—a curve in the hallway where guards suit up before storming into the Bing. Riot vests, fireproof jackets, firemen's boots, metal helmets, and gas masks lined wooden shelves. Samuel's words seemed to linger in Grant's mind; without any prodding, the warden steered the conversation back to suicide. "If you happen to have one of those experiences of a guy hanging up, there's guilt," Grant said. "I've had this as an officer. I saw a guy successfully hanging up. It leaves a hollowness."

In his office, Warden Grant explained that he had been an officer at the Anna M. Cross Center 15 years earlier when an inmate tied a T-shirt to a cell door and hung himself. "You ask yourself a million questions," said the warden, leaning back in his leather chair. Grant finished his remote control and glanced across his desk at the three video screens, which allowed him to monitor every part of his jail. "It's very painful," he said. "You're in touch with the fact that you're supposed to be preserving life. It's something that always stays with you."

Nobody has killed himself in the Bing for several years, though there were six suicides in the city's jails in 1999 and six in 1998. In the Bing, Rivituso said, "We had two attempts in the last four months [of 1999], and the SPA [suicide prevention aide] was the first to alert the officer. They had torn sheets tied around their necks, [but] in both cases their feet were on the ground. In one case, the guy was just sitting on the bed—he wasn't even attached to anything." Rivituso explained that they report such incidents to a central office only if a mental health worker determines it was a "bona fide" suicide attempt.

"With inmate suicide attempts, we have nonserious and serious," Grant said. "In both these cases, we viewed it as an attempt for these individuals to avoid doing their time." Training for Bing guards includes warnings about prisoners trying to feign insanity in order to escape their solitary confinement and move into a less punitive setting.

"We call them Bing beaters," Rivituso added. "They play like they're crazy so they can get out of the Bing and be in a dorm with people who really are off so they can take advantage of them. We all saw *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. McMurphy plays cards with all the M.O.'s [mental observation patients] and wins their money. We have a lot of McMurphys here."

One minute later, an assistant opened the door to the warden's office and handed Rivituso a slip of paper. Signed by a doctor, the form upgraded a recent incident to a suicide.

See GONNERMAN page 62

GONNERMAN from page 68

In this instance, a Bing prisoner had tied a sheet around his neck and attached it to a vent cover in his cell around 2 a.m. I asked the warden and deputy warden if this was one of the two suicide attempts they had just mentioned. "No," Rivituso said. "This would be the third."

The interruption seemed to push my hosts slightly off-balance. On our tour, Grant had used corporate jargon to describe his job. "We try to operate from a preventive management approach," he'd said. "Our goal is to create a win-win atmosphere." But suddenly the Bing seemed less a well-managed cell block than a place of horror, where officers confront the seemingly impossible task of keeping prisoners alive in a place designed to crush their souls.

Rivituso handed the doctor's form to Grant, who stared at the sheet a few moments. Neither the warden nor the deputy warden could recall the incident, and they wondered aloud whether this particular inmate was actually one of theirs.

Perhaps such incidents are hard to remember because so many Bing prisoners engage in similar behavior. There may have been only two—or now three—"official" suicide attempts in the Bing so far this year, but that number tells only a fraction of the story. There were more than 30 incidents of self-injurious behavior in the Bing during the first five months of 1999. In January, an inmate was found lying in his cell with a string around his neck, saying that he heard voices telling him to hang up. A Bing prisoner lit his jumpsuit on fire in February. In March, an inmate sliced both his wrists with a razor and claimed to have swallowed seven pills. Some of these inmates were sent to other jails, some back to the same cell block, and some to the Bing for mentally ill inmates. These incidents might sound like suicide attempts, but here on Rikers Island they are called "manipulative gestures."

A Sense of Humor

Later that afternoon, I watched as 200 men marched single-file into a cavernous tent, their backs straight and their arms stiff by their sides. The inmates wore buzz cuts and army fatigues—the required attire for Rikers' military-style boot camp, known as the High Impact Incarceration Program.

On this August afternoon, the men were getting a break from their rigid regimen and a chance to see an Off-Broadway show. They were not quite sure what to expect. Six weeks earlier, they had sat through a concert of classical music. In recent years, luckier inmates had seen concerts by dead prez, Fat Joe, and Wu-Tang Clan, courtesy of *Stress*, a hip-hop magazine based in Hollis, Queens.

Watching the parade of prisoners was Danny Hoch, a 28-year-old actor sporting Adidas running pants and a baseball hat facing backward. The inmates seemed not to recognize Hoch, though he had been making art out of their culture for the past three years, touring the country with his one-man show, *Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop*, which had sold out for 14 weeks at P.S. 122 in the East Village.

Today marked Hoch's first trip back to Rikers since 1994, when he'd finished a five-year stint teaching drama classes to inmates. A few months earlier, Hoch had filmed a scene for his new movie inside the prison barge floating off the South Bronx. As a thank-you to the agency, he offered to do a free show on Rikers. I asked Antenen, the jails' spokesman, if I could join the audience, and though he'd never heard of Hoch, he agreed to let me watch.

The last men to enter found seats and the show began. Hoch delivered rapid-fire monologues in the voices of various characters—a stressed-out prison guard, a flirtatious teenager, a Cuban street peddler. The crowd laughed at Hoch's skits, but none got them hollering as loudly as when he grabbed a broom and be-

came "Andy," an HIV-positive inmate who passed the hours of a long prison sentence by working as a porter.

As Andy pushed a broom around the floor, his speech grew faster, darting from topic to topic, from the aggravation of working at McDonald's to the prison's overcooked carrots. By the end of his 13-minute rant, Andy became completely unhinged. "I'm dying!" the inmate shouted, slamming down his broom. "I'M DYING IN THIS MOTHERFUCKER!"

Hoch-as-Andy paused, looking off to the side at an invisible guard. "Ay, everything's all right over here," he said, forcing himself to sound calm. "Don't push the button, Hal. There's no problem." He picked up his broom and began sweeping again. "Hey, Hal, you don't gotta push the button, see?" As if to prove he was still sane, Andy hummed as he swept. "Do-do-dido." Then Andy dropped to the floor, and the audience could almost see the guard looming over

Six weeks earlier, they had sat through a concert of classical music. In recent years, luckier inmates had seen concerts by dead prez, Fat Joe, and Wu-Tang Clan.

him. "Go 'head," Andy said. "Search me. You wanna search me? No problem. I told ya, there's nothin' wrong. No fightin'. Just got a little excited. See? You don't gotta push the button."

This was the grimmest moment in Hoch's show, and when he spoke these lines to an East Village audience, everyone was silent. But here on Rikers, the men slapped their thighs and howled with laughter. In the back of the room, several guards wiped tears from their cheeks. They all knew what would happen if Hal did push the button, how the boom squad would arrive with their riot vests and sun shields and wooden batons, how the guards would remind Andy who was in charge.

They did not need to stretch their imaginations to understand why Andy was so frustrated and enraged, to understand how the powerlessness of prison had weakened his grip on sanity. Armed with only a broom and a monologue, the actor had peeled away the layers of spin and laid bare the island's constant tension between not only prisoners and guards, but also control and terror. "That's what happens to you [in here]," one inmate whispered to me later. "You start buggin' out."

Now, though, the prisoners watched Hoch and roared so hard they became a sea of open mouths, all gold caps and missing teeth. It was, for me, something of a mad dream—the inmates laughing at the depiction of their own degradation, courtesy of their jailers, while their jailers laughed too—and I left soon thereafter, having confirmed the wardens' boasts that their mission was successful, that the incarceration of 14,600 souls was complete. Not long afterward, Kerik left too, armed with the lessons of Rikers Island as he stepped into the role of NYPD commissioner and into the national media spotlight. Meanwhile, from the window seats of commuter planes descending into LaGuardia, the view remains the same: refurbished school buses carrying shackled New Yorkers back and forth across the Rikers Island bridge. □

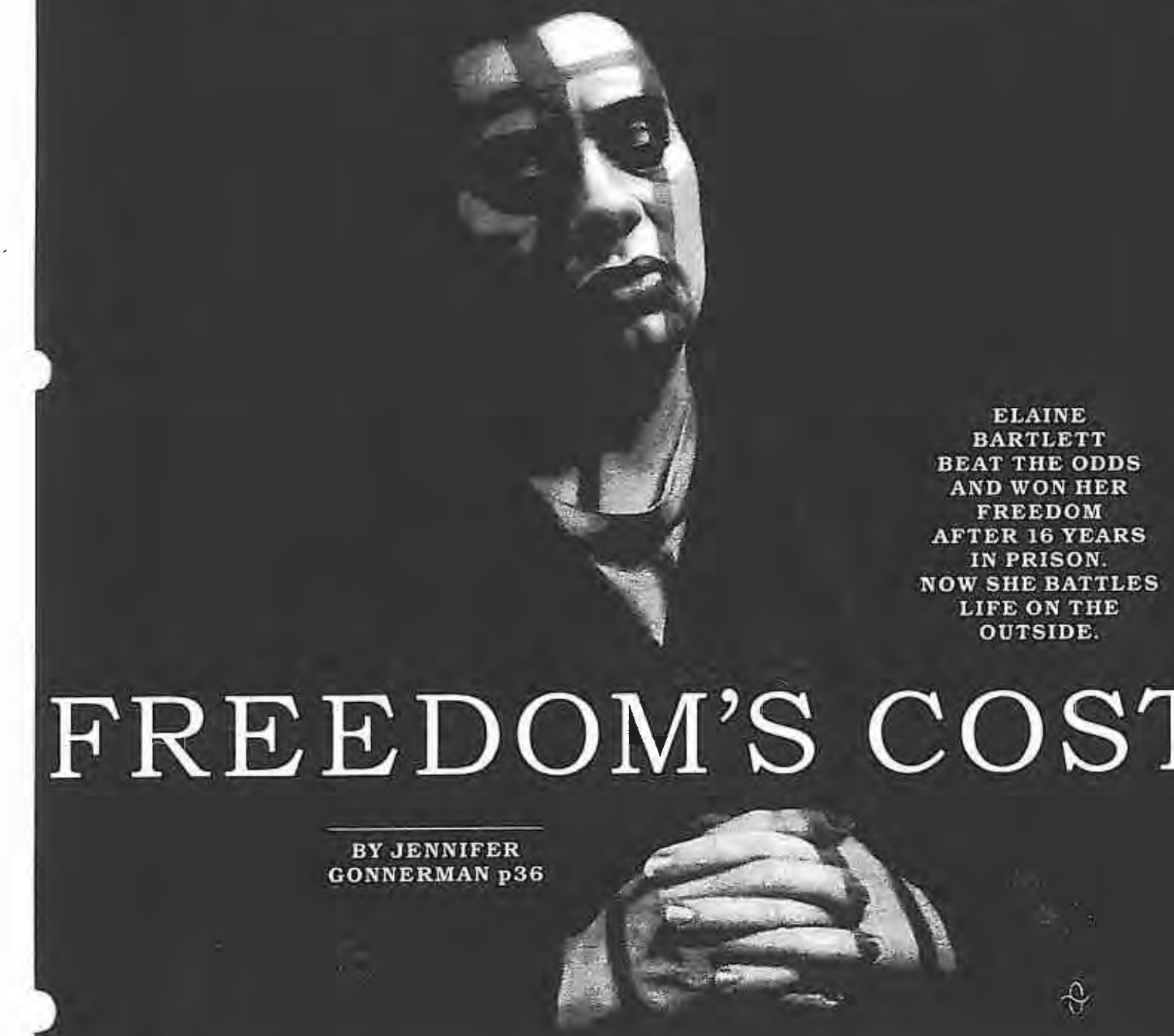
This story was reported and photographed with support from the Center on Crime, Communities & Culture of the Open Society Institute.

RALPH NADER SLAMS HIS CRITICS

p29

the village

VOICE



ELAINE
BARTLETT
BEAT THE ODDS
AND WON HER
FREEDOM
AFTER 16 YEARS
IN PRISON.
NOW SHE BATTLES
LIFE ON THE
OUTSIDE.

FREEDOM'S COST

BY JENNIFER
GONNERMAN p36



ELAINE BARTLETT

ELAINE AND HER SON APACHE SAVOR HER FIRST MOMENTS OF FREEDOM.



After 16 Years in Prison Elaine Bartlett Came Home to a City and a Family She Barely Knew. Freedom Wasn't at All What She'd Imagined

BY JENNIFER GONNERMAN
Photographs by Andrew Lichtenstein

LIFE ON THE OUTSIDE

THE HOMECOMING

Elaine Bartlett waved goodbye to the guard behind the front desk, strutted the last few yards to the prison's front door, and stepped out into the brisk winter morning. Snowflakes sprinkled her face and her black trench coat, but she did not pause to brush them off. As quickly as her three-inch heels would permit, Elaine marched down the asphalt pathway toward an 18-foot chain-link fence. At 9:54 a.m. on January 26, 2000, after 16 years locked inside Bedford Hills prison in Westchester County, Elaine was finally going home. • Suddenly, behind her, dozens of women began yelling. Elaine stopped, spun around, and looked up at the brick building that housed the prison's school. Prisoners filled its windows, waving mittens, hats, and scarves. "We love you, Elaine!" they shouted. "You go, girl!" It was a Bedford Hills ritual she had participated in many times, shouting goodbyes to other women while her own prison sentence dragged on. Elaine raised both arms. See GONNERMAN, page 38

INSIDE AND OUT:
 PART TWO OF A TWO-PART
 SPECIAL REPORT ON PRISON
 AND ITS AFTERMATH



GONNERMAN from page 36 and waved back. Then she continued her journey to the prison's front gate.

On the other side of the fence, a young man in a parka paced the prison guards' parking lot. Elaine passed through the last gate, skittered along the snow, and threw her arms around him. Robert "Apache" Paschall buried his face in his mother's hair and squeezed her tightly, as if to ensure she wouldn't abandon him again. When Elaine finally let go, there was a smudge of cranberry lipstick on Apache's coat.

"We did it!" she shouted.

When Elaine arrived at the maximum-security prison in 1984, she was 26 years old. At five feet seven inches, she often wore shoes that added an inch or two, making her statuesque. She was slender and pretty, with large brown eyes and long, wavy hair. Now she was 42. A fresh dye job hid her gray roots, and the prison's starchy diet had left her with a size-16 figure. Elaine had lost her youth in prison, but that bothered her far less than her years away from her family.

Before her arrest, she lived in an East Harlem housing project, where she was raising four small children. 10-year-old Apache, six-year-old Jamel, three-year-old Satara, and one-year-old Danae. While Elaine was in prison, her children had become adults, and now the three oldest each had a baby of their own.

"Where's Tara and Na-na?" Elaine asked, referring to her daughters by their nicknames.

"Tara is asleep and Na-na is in school," Apache said.

Elaine's smile disappeared. But she decided not to grill Apache about why his sisters hadn't come to celebrate her first minutes of freedom.

Instead, Elaine linked her fingers with her son's and led him across the street toward a row of television camera tripods stuck in a snowbank. Elaine was not just any inmate going home; by now, she was a minor celebrity. One month earlier, just before Christmas, Governor George Pataki had granted clemency to Elaine and two other female inmates, permitting them to leave prison before their sentences ended.

"Congratulations," said a WCBS-TV reporter, pointing his microphone toward Elaine's lips.

"What are your thoughts after coming out after so many years?"

"I waited for so long that I'm just thankful the governor gave me my life back," Elaine said. "Today, my life starts again."

"What's the first thing you're going to do when you get home?"

"I'm going to enjoy my family and show them how much love I've carried all these years and let them know that without them I wouldn't have made it."

"What have the past 16 years been like?"

"Hell."

Elaine's arrest was a catastrophe not only for her, but for her children. In the fall of 1983, she had carried a four-ounce sack of cocaine from Harlem to Albany in a deal set up by an acquaintance, who turned out to be a police informant. Not only was Elaine busted, but so was Nathan Brooks, the father of her two daughters. It was Elaine's first arrest. Under New York State's strict drug laws, she got 20-years-to-life; Nate got 25-years-to-life. In one afternoon, all of Elaine's children lost their mother, and her daughters also lost their father.

Elaine's mother, Yvonne Bartlett, stepped in to raise the children. She began bringing them to the prison visiting room each week, a routine she continued for nearly 10 years. There, Elaine would braid her daughters' hair and listen to her sons perform raps they had written. As they grew older, the children occasionally spent the night inside the prison's fences, in trailers equipped with a kitchen, a television, and a bed. Elaine tried to be a good mother, nagging them to bring their report cards and using her phone privileges to track down their guidance counselors. But of course, she missed every school graduation, every birthday party, every basketball game.

Before she got arrested, Elaine had never heard of the state's Rockefeller drug laws, which were signed by Governor Nelson Rockefeller in 1973. She did not know that anyone convicted of possessing four or more ounces or selling two or more ounces of cocaine or heroin receives a mandatory prison sentence of at least 15-years-to-life. Nor did she know that the length of these prison sentences is determined solely by the quantity of drugs involved, not whether the defendant is a courier or a kingpin.

In prison, Elaine became an expert on the Rockefeller drug laws. She read court cases in the law library and studied newspaper accounts of the political debate over the laws. She learned that almost everyone arrested for a drug crime pleads guilty rather than do what she did—risk going to trial and facing a lengthy mandatory sentence. By the time of her release, Elaine could rattle off statistics about how the Rockefeller drug laws have led to a prison-building boom, how there are more than 20,000 drug prisoners in New York, and how most drug prisoners are, like her, African American.

"Do you feel that society will let you live down [your crime] when you leave here?" the reporter asked outside Bedford Hills. "Are you worried about people judging you?"

"I'm not worried about them judging me. Now I've empowered myself. I've educated myself. So I can stand here and say I am very proud of the woman I am today, that I was able to keep a bond with my family despite being incarcerated and be the best mother that I could be from behind these walls."

When she got back home, Elaine planned to get a job and show her family a way of life that had nothing to do with selling drugs or getting arrested. She had dropped out of school in 10th grade, but in prison she got her high school degree and became the first person in her family to finish college, receiving a two-year associate's degree. She wanted all her children to finish high school and go to college too. It wouldn't be easy. Her younger son, Mel, was already on Rikers Island, awaiting trial on drug charges. Still, Elaine believed her children had held up fairly well. Unlike many prisoners, she had not lost her children to the foster care system. "At least I only have one kid in prison," she would say. "Some people I know, all their children are in prison."

Elaine did not explain all this to the reporters circling around, but when she got a moment alone with Apache, she announced her plan. "We're going to change the whole cycle of the Bartlett family for the next generation," she said.

By 11 a.m. the television cameras had

See GONNERMAN page 40



LEFT: ELAINE IN HER ROOM AT THE GREENPOINT YMCA. RIGHT: ELAINE'S CODEFENDANT, BATE, AT GREEN HAVEN PRISON. BOTTOM: OUTSIDE HER WELCOME-HOME PARTY, ELAINE GREETS HER DAUGHTER TARA.



TOP: PROTESTING THE ROCKEFELLER DRUG LAWS AT THE STATE CAPITOL, ELAINE CARRIES POSTERS FOR NATE AND TWO FRIENDS. BOTTOM: IN THE EAST VILLAGE, ELAINE REVIEWS HER BOOK OF BUSINESS CARDS.



GONNERMAN from page 38

left, and so had the other two clemency recipients, Elaine was not in a hurry. Swinging her trench coat over one shoulder, she pranced back and forth on the wet snow, showing off her electric purple pantsuit and transforming the prison guards' parking lot into a fashion runway. "Do you like my outfit?" she asked, not waiting for an answer. "I'm a free woman now," she announced. "It's all good."

Elaine climbed into the van that would take her to Manhattan, the first time since 1983 that she would travel without handcuffs and leg irons. Reaching inside her new Victoria's Secret bra, she pulled out a wad of bills. "They gave me \$40," Elaine said. "Can you believe that?" She massaged the money with her fingertips; these bills, the first she had touched in years, are the prison's standard farewell gift. "Can you buy lunch for \$40 now?" Elaine asked, then laughed at her own joke.

Elaine began her campaign for clemency in 1995, after she had finished half her minimum prison sentence and was eligible to apply. Her mother was seriously ill with diabetes, and Elaine was desperate to get home to help. She drafted a one-page letter to the clemency bureau pleading for early release.

There are more than 70,000 prisoners in New York State, and the governor typically grants no more than six or seven clemency requests each year. Some years, he grants none. The clemency bureau rejected Elaine in 1996. Her mother died two years later. Elaine arrived at Yvonne's funeral in the back of a prison van, wearing handcuffs and leg irons.

I met Elaine a few weeks after her mother's death, when I went to Bedford Hills to interview her about the state's drug laws. We spoke for an hour or two inside a conference room near the prison's entrance. Elaine had never been interviewed before, and she was nervous. Sweat covered her brow. When the conversation turned to her mother, tears streamed down Elaine's cheeks. To me, she looked defeated. Tangled hair. Gray roots. No makeup. Later, I learned that Elaine purposely did not fix herself up before the interview. When her picture appeared in the newspaper, she didn't want to look any better than she felt.

Elaine reapplied for clemency in 1998. This time, she recruited a prison teacher to help her, and she solicited letters from everyone she knew, from the prison's guards to her children. Meanwhile, a grassroots movement to repeal the Rockefeller drug laws was growing in New York. Elaine became one of its favorite examples of the laws' injustices. Charles Grodin championed her case on his television talk show, and her story appeared in the *Daily News*, *The New York Times*, and twice in the *Voice*.

On December 23, 1999, Pataki awarded Elaine clemency, shaving four years off her sentence. Her perseverance and newly acquired media savvy had paid off. Elaine celebrated by planning her future. She swore she would never be like some longtime inmates, whose Christmas cards back to the prison talked about how much they missed everyone. It was too late to repay her mother for raising her children, but at least Elaine could go home



TOP: ON ELAINE'S 43RD BIRTHDAY, HER SISTER MICHELLE (RIGHT) AND MICHELLE'S HUSBAND, PERVIG (LEFT), TAKE ELAINE TO TIMES SQUARE. BOTTOM: ELAINE PICKS OUT BUSINESS ATTIRE AT THE BOTTOMLESS CLOSET.



and try to make up for some of the lost years.

I was working on a story about Elaine's successful fight for clemency, and so on the morning of her release, I sat behind her in the back row of the van as it sped out of the parking lot. Lora Tucker, the former prison teacher who helped free her, was in the driver's seat. Apache sat next to his mother, holding her hand.

This morning he had woken before 5 a.m. to catch a ride to the prison. As usual, he wore jeans, a gold chain, and a silver stud in his left ear. Though he was only 26, the same age Elaine had been when she went to prison, years of responsibility made him seem exhausted, with perpetually sleepy eyes. In all his trips to the visiting room, Elaine had never seen him cry. But this morning he had, and Elaine gently brushed away his tears with her freshly painted purple-gitter nails.

Apache had once been a high school basketball star with a promising future. He had played for La Salle Academy and High School for the Humanities, then won a scholarship to a prep school in South Dakota. He got a college scholarship, too, but then his grandmother's health deteriorated. Friends told Apache he would be crazy to sacrifice his basketball dreams for his family. But Apache came home anyway, to help raise his sisters. He eventually got a job coaching basketball part-time at a Catholic girls' high school. He also ran his own AAU basketball club with seven teams, which he entered in tournaments around the city.

Now Elaine wanted to locate her daughters. I handed Apache a cell phone and he di-

aled home. "Where's Tara at?" he asked. "Go wake her up and tell her her mother wants to speak with her."

Elaine had never held a cell phone, but she had no trouble figuring out how to use it. "You know who you're talking to?" Elaine asked her daughter. "Do you know where your mother is at? That's right, I'm in the car on my way to Manhattan. Listen. At three o'clock, I want you and Na-na to meet me at the restaurant. Do you have a pen? Take this address. We'll be outside waiting for you, so you'll definitely see your mother. You remember what your mother looks like, right?" Elaine laughed again. Apache and Tara had come to visit her just three weeks earlier.

The van hurtled down the highway en route to the West Village, where opponents of the Rockefeller drug laws were holding a party for the newly freed clemency recipients. First, she stopped at the Division of Parole on West 31st Street in Manhattan to meet her parole officer. Elaine was out of prison, but still under state supervision for the next five years. She would have to check in with her parole officer every week.

At 3:30 p.m., Elaine arrived at her welcome-home party. She was striding toward the restaurant's front door just as her older daughter, Tara, and Tara's boyfriend climbed out of a cab. Elaine hugged her daughter, and a photographer and cameraman ran over to record the moment. No time for a private reunion. When they got inside the restaurant, Tara hid in a corner while her mother bounced from

See GONNERMAN page 42

GONNERMAN from page 41

journalist to journalist, savoring her minutes in the media spotlight with one arm draped around Apache's shoulders.

"It was the best walk I ever took," Elaine said to a WB11 TV reporter, describing her march down the icy path to the prison's exit.

"When you heard that [20-years-to-life] sentence, what were you thinking?" the reporter asked.

"That I was railroaded out of my life. It didn't take me 16 years, two weeks, and three days to learn my lesson. You could have put me on probation. You could have had me do community service. There were different things you could've done with me other than throwing me in jail and throwing away the key like I was Charles Manson or somebody."

The party, the reporters, the free linguini with shrimp—it was all part of Elaine's victory lap, the beginning of her new life as a free woman. Activists, ex-cons, reporters, prisoners' relatives, a judge, and Charles Grodin congratulated her. But Elaine's family reunion was still incomplete, and so around 5:30 p.m. Apache and Tara took their mother over to the school on East Houston Street where their younger sister frequently practiced basketball. Elaine bumped into Danae in a stairwell. "Oh, my God!" Danae shouted, as she embraced Elaine. "My mother! My mother!"

Finally, Elaine had tracked down three of her four children. Her son Mel would have to wait until she could get to Rikers Island. Elaine's children steered her north along the eastern edge of Alphabet City, past the supermarkets and bodegas lining Avenue D. A television crew tagged behind to record her triumphant return.

Before her arrest, Elaine had lived with her children on East 122nd Street. She had never lived in the East Village, but this was where her mother had raised Elaine's children. Over the years, Elaine had spent so many hours studying the snapshots her family sent—of picnics and birthday parties and barbecues—that she felt as though she had been on these blocks before.

The children led their mother down a graffiti-scarred hallway, and they grew quiet as they neared their apartment's front door. The door opened, and Elaine stepped inside. She stopped. There were no crepe-paper streamers, no helium balloons, no "Welcome Home, Mom!" signs. Instead, pieces of a dining table leaned against one wall, held together by duct tape. Broken chairs spread across the front foyer. Dirt smudged the ceiling. And a tattered sheet hung in the doorway to the living room, creating a makeshift wall.

"Oh, my God!" Elaine shouted. She never imagined her children's home would be in worse condition than the prison she had just left. She whirled around. "Turn that camera off! Do not show that on TV!"

APARTMENT LIVING

Ever since she left her children and went to prison, Elaine had been looking forward to the day when she could return to New York City and live with them again. But the future she had fantasized about did not feature an apartment with bare cupboards, naked lightbulbs, and a broken toilet seat. Even so, Elaine moved in. It was not a tough decision. She had nowhere else to go.

Before Elaine arrived, four adults and two babies lived in the apartment, which had three bedrooms and one bathroom. Elaine's younger sister had taken over the



TOP: IN HER BEDROOM, TARA DRESSES HER BABY, TENÉA, AS HER COUSIN'S SON JOE PLAYS NEARBY. BOTTOM: ELAINE HEADS TO HER JOB AT A MEN'S SHELTER.



living room. Elaine's niece and her one-year-old son shared a bedroom. Apache occupied another bedroom. And at the end of the narrow hallway, Elaine's older daughter Tara and Tara's eight-month-old daughter, Tenéa, slept in the largest bedroom. There was, of course, no empty room for Elaine.

So Elaine moved into Tara's bedroom, which she figured was about twice as large as her last prison cell. The room was so crowded with Tara and Tenéa's possessions—a baby swing, diapers, sneakers, trendy clothes—that Elaine left her plastic bags in the hallway. Elaine had given away most of her possessions before leaving prison, but the bags held the important items: family snapshots, legal documents, newspaper clippings, her children's letters. She began sleeping next to her daughter and granddaughter in their queen-size bed. Elaine, at least, did not mind. Sleeping alone on a prison cot had felt stranger; she had never had her own bed when she was growing up.

Elaine knew her family kept secrets from her while she was in prison, hiding all the bad news behind a single, reassuring phrase: "It's all right." Now that she was home, Elaine quickly discovered that nothing was all right. The apartment was a mess, and everyone's spirits seemed broken, too.

Tara, for one, seemed very depressed. Elaine's older daughter was pretty, with almond-shaped eyes and long, straight hair. The 19-year-old had a boyfriend and a penchant for designer labels like Tommy Hilfinger and Eryce. When she was two years old, before Elaine went to prison, Tara used to slip on her mother's high heels and parade around their apartment. During trailer visits at Bedford Hills, Elaine remembered having to chase her away from the mirror, where she always seemed to be primping. But that was the past.

Tara had dropped out of high school and now spent the days inside the apartment, minding her baby and watching soap operas. Now Elaine had to nag her to fix her matted hair. Elaine was not exactly sure what was at the root of her daughter's unhappiness. She did have sickle-cell anemia, which left her in extreme pain. But Elaine thought Tara was likely still grieving her grandmother's death.

"The problem is I cry all the time because my mom is away and my grandmother is gone and there's nobody there for me no more," Tara had written to the clemency bureau in 1998. In another letter, she added, "Sometimes I feel like killing myself because my mother left me and now my grandmother is gone."

Elaine's younger daughter had also composed a letter begging the governor to free her mother. "She has been locked up for 15 years—that is all of my life," Danae wrote. "Just let her come home. She would not do the same thing again. She will be trying to catch up with her kids for all the things she missed."

But when Elaine arrived at her children's apartment, she discovered her younger daughter did not even live here. Danae had moved out long ago and joined a friend's family. No one had dared to tell Elaine earlier because they knew the news would enrage her. Indeed, Elaine refused to accept that she would never get to be Danae's live-in mother. Several times during her first week home, Elaine stormed over to Danae's place and screamed at her to return. Once she even snatched an armful of Danae's clothes and brought them back to the apartment.

See GONNERMAN page 44





EASTER IN CENTRAL PARK: ELAINE WITH NEPHEWS JOE, DARREN, AND MICHAEL

GONNERMAN from page 43

Danae refused to relocate, though she did stop by her siblings' place. "You're not going nowhere!" her mother told her. "Stay here!" But when Elaine stepped into the shower, the teenager headed for the door. Naked and dripping, Elaine grabbed a robe, streaked out of the bathroom, and chased her daughter into the building's hallway. Elaine grabbed Danae and started shaking her. "You're staying right here!" she shouted. Danae left. Though she felt hurt, Elaine would later admit that she respected her younger daughter for having the gumption to find a new family after her grandmother died.

Danae was angry too. When her mother was around, the 17-year-old scowled more often than she smiled—even after happy events, like winning a basketball game. Danae, who was tall and sturdily built, played guard and forward on one of Apache's basketball teams. Three years earlier, when she was 15, Danae had erupted in the prison visiting room. "What are you really here for?" she shouted at her mother. "Don't lie to us! You couldn't be in here for what you say you're in here for. Who did you kill? You've been in here my whole life! When are you coming home?"

The home Elaine had dreamed of returning to was a comfortable, familiar place. But nothing about the apartment where she now lived made her feel relaxed. In fact, she was starting to feel more stressed than she had when she was in prison. With the exception of Apache, everyone around Elaine felt like a stranger.

Elaine was the eldest daughter of seven siblings, and she had watched from prison as her family fell apart. Two brothers were dead. Two were in prison. Her sister Michelle, 35, now lived in Harlem, raising nine children. But of all her family members, no one had changed more than her younger sister Sabrina, who was 38 years old and sleeping on a fold-out couch in the living room. Elaine remembered Sabrina as attractive and successful. When she was in her twenties, Sabrina always had a job—working undercover security at Key Food or Saks Fifth Avenue—and she always had new clothes, a testament to her ability to persuade her many boyfriends to pay her layaway bills.

But during much of the 1990s, Sabrina passed her days with her boyfriend, she said, "getting high and getting hit." Crack, heroin, powder cocaine—she tried them all and wound up with a \$300-a-day habit. Three years earlier, Sabrina had tried to kill herself by jumping into the East River from the FDR Drive. A rescue team had to pull her out of the water.

Now Elaine barely recognized her sister. Dark spots covered Sabrina's arms. Most of her teeth were missing. Every morning she commuted to a methadone program on 125th Street. In the afternoons, she retreated to the living room and held imaginary conversations with their deceased mother.

There were so many problems in the apartment that Elaine did not know where to start. She had hoped to celebrate her first days of freedom by riding the Cyclone at Coney Island or eating a seafood dinner on City Island. But one look at her family and she knew that was impossible. She could not have any fun yet. Not until she had filled her family's empty refrigerator and fixed up the apartment. On her first full day home, she went to Costco and bought a mop, a broom, sponges, Comet, and Lysol. She put a new seat on the toilet and a new trash can in the kitchen. And she threw out the broken kitchen table.

Later that week, Elaine cooked the dinner she had been craving for years—spare ribs, collard greens, yams, potato salad, corn bread—enough food for everyone who was home and all their friends. It was the sort of meal her mother used to cook when she presided over her famous holiday parties, preparing enough food for at least a dozen families.

But the family spirit she tried to promote did not last and her cleanup efforts were soon undone. The toilet seat broke again. Garbage routinely overflowed the trash can. Rats scurried down the apartment's hallway. Elaine knew her mother never would have permitted her home to become a hovel, but now Elaine could not seem to stop the slide. She watched the children disappear into their bedrooms at night, locking their doors behind them. Instead of eating together, they hid boxes of cereal in their rooms.

Elaine and I talked several times in her first few weeks home. All the enthusiasm from her release day had vanished from her voice. "My children have created their own prison," Elaine said. "The apartment feels icy cold, like where I came from. It doesn't seem like a home. There is no love. Everything my mother strived for and taught them, they just put it on a shelf and forgot about it."

Over and over, Elaine repeated a single sentence to describe her predicament. "I left one prison to come home to another," she said. Being out of prison, she had realized, was not the same as being free. It wasn't just the decrepit apartment. It was also the reality of parole, the fact that the criminal justice system was still watching her every move, and could punish her if she reacted to this emotional maelstrom by making a single mistake.

Like prison, parole has dozens of rules. And if she was caught violating any one of them at any time over the next five years, her parole officer could send her back to prison. Parolees are not supposed to have any en-

slip, and not surprisingly, many do. Forty percent of the state's prisoners are reincarcerated within three years of being released. This is a phenomenon Elaine knows well, since at Bedford Hills she watched some women go in and out again and again. Some had committed serious crimes, but most had landed back in prison after violating parole—often for flunking a drug test or failing to check in with their parole officer.

I thought Elaine's struggle had ended the morning she left prison. But as I listened to her describe her life, I realized that in many ways her travails had just begun. And I figured her predicament was in many ways typical, and would be shared by many of the 600,000 ex-convicts, men and women, who are making their way back into U.S. society this year. I asked Elaine if I could write a story following her through the year, tagging along as she tried to rebuild her life. She agreed.

Elaine's motives were partly personal, partly political. She thought having a reporter around might help her get better services, perhaps find a job or an apartment faster. She also hoped that publicizing her situation would persuade state legislators to change the Rockefeller drug laws. Few drug felons go to rallies and lobby legislators once they leave prison, but Elaine intended to keep fighting. About politicians who might read her story, she said, "Now when they lay their heads down at night, they'll have something to think about. I don't want anyone to forget Elaine Bartlett."

Elaine and I spent hundreds of hours together after she came home. Sometimes I asked questions. More often, I just hung around, watching and taking notes, while she went about her day-to-day life. During her first months home, she had few friends, and I became a sort of confidante. After a while, her family members started to refer to me as "Elaine's friend," even though everyone knew I was a reporter. I interviewed most of the people in her life, including her sons, her brothers, and her daughters' father. Her daughters, Danae and Tara, did not want to talk.

As store windows filled with red, heart-shaped boxes of chocolates and other Valentine's Day treats, Elaine walked the streets looking for a job. She filled out applications to be a census worker, a security guard, and a cashier at stores along 14th Street. But checking "yes" next to "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" did not invite enthusiastic responses. Few employers were willing to hire an ex-con, much less one who had just left prison after 16 years. The stigma of being a convicted felon would be hard to erase. During her first weeks home, Elaine signed up for public assistance. Her first trip to the welfare office yielded \$18. She was told it would take 45 days for full benefits to begin.

Over and over, Elaine repeated a single sentence to describe her predicament. 'I left one prison to come home to another,' she said.

counters with the police. Any police contact—whether a parking ticket or domestic dispute—and Elaine might wind up back in jail. There is also no staying out past 9 p.m. No smoking pot. No owning a pit bull or a rottweiler. No leaving New York City without notifying your parole officer. No visiting a prisoner without permission. No socializing with anybody who has a criminal record. No staying at a friend's house without telling your parole officer.

Parolees are supposed to pay for their own supervision—\$30 a month—though they won't be penalized if they cannot afford the fee. To monitor the state's 50,000 parolees, parole officers rely on random drug tests and surprise home inspections. There are so many regulations that even a well-intentioned ex-con can

Elaine's children and a few friends tried to help. Tara bought her two outfits. Apache got his mother her own phone line. (Her first answering machine message announced, "You've reached Elaine Bartlett, a free woman after 16 years.") The former prison teacher who helped her win clemency gave her a beeper. But what Elaine really needed was money. She struck up a friendship with an activist she met at her coming-home party, and he began giving her \$100 or \$200 each time he saw her.

Elaine was determined to rebuild her life and repair her children's lives, too. In many ways, prison had changed Elaine. It had given her diplomas, contacts, and a belief that her own efforts might pay off. Still, friends needed

See GONNERMAN page 46

GONNERMAN from page 44

her about taking on the seemingly impossible task of fixing her family's problems. They told her just to worry about herself, to focus on getting a job and a bachelor's degree.

"Don't let anyone stress you out," she recalled her brother Kenneth saying, when he called from prison in Massachusetts. "Do what you gotta do for you. They're your family. Love them from a distance. But they will call the police on you. I'm telling you because I've been through it."

Elaine ignored the advice. She hadn't wanted 16 years to be a full-time mother just to give up now that she was home.

BACK TO JAIL

On her first visit to her parole officer, Elaine began badgering him to permit her to return to prison. Not to Bedford Hills, but to Rikers Island, where her younger son, Mel, was locked up. And to the upstate prison where Nate, her daughters' father, was in the 17th year of a 25-years-to-life sentence.

Elaine met Nate when they were teenagers. Before their arrest in 1983, they had known each other for eight years. Carrying cocaine to Albany was her idea; at the last minute, he decided to tag along just to make sure nothing happened to her. While locked up in the Albany County jail, Nate and Elaine married. They were sent to separate prisons and stayed in various degrees of contact over the years. He wrote regularly; she stopped after several years. In 1990, he sent her divorce papers, and Elaine suspected an affair with another woman, someone who had been able to visit him.

Since Elaine had come home, Nate had called several times and sent a letter nearly every day. Guilt consumed Elaine when she thought about how he was doing 25-years-to-life because of her, about how Tara and Danae had grown up without their father. "It's one thing to go to jail for your shit, but for someone else's shit?" Elaine said. "That's tough. I can't forget about him."

Elaine needed to see Nate, but first she wanted to visit her younger son, who had been on Rikers Island since October. "Nate will have to wait," she said. "Mel is my baby."

Of all Elaine's children, Mel seemed to take her imprisonment the hardest. When his grandmother could not bring him to Bedford Hills, 10-year-old Mel would sneak out of the apartment and go by himself. He had memorized the route. Ride the subway to Grand Central Terminal. Transfer to Metro-North. Get off at the Bedford Hills stop in Westchester County. Hail a taxi. The guards weren't supposed to let him in without a chaperone, but Mel discovered they had a hard time turning away children. At the end of every visit, Mel clung to his mother's leg and locked



OUTSIDE TENÉA'S FIRST-BIRTHDAY BASH: ELAINE (WEARING POCAHONTAS HEADBAND) WITH HER DAUGHTER DANAÉ

the guards who tried to pull him off. "Fuck that!" he shouted. "I ain't going nowhere!"

By the time Mel turned 13, he was hanging around outside all night—smoking pot, stealing cars, selling drugs. Yvonne held nightly kitchen-table vigils, waiting in the dark until 3 a.m. for her grandson to come home. Then she would strip-search him, empty his pockets, and throw his cash and drugs in the toilet. Yvonne kept up her late-night vigils even as her diabetes worsened. But she was losing the war, losing Mel to the streets, where he graduated from selling pot and powder cocaine to selling crack and heroin.

Elaine heard stories about Mel getting into trouble. He stayed silent when she reprimanded him over the phone, so she tried waiting until Mel came to see her to lecture him about the perils of drug dealing. Once again, he didn't listen. The next time Mel visited, Elaine punched her son in the face. "Don't make me have to come over the fence, so the TV news says, 'Woman escapes from Bedford Hills,'" she said. "I don't want to have to come home and visit you in prison."

Elaine's threats failed. The ninth-grader stopped going to school, stopped coming home at night, and stopped visiting his mother. When Elaine tracked him down by phone at his girlfriend's house, Mel promised to come see her. But she knew he wouldn't. Trapped in prison, Elaine was powerless to counter the lure of Mel's \$2000-a-day income.

Eventually, Mel went to prison for the same crime Elaine committed: selling drugs to an undercover cop. To avoid a lengthy mandatory sentence like the one his mother received, Mel decided not to go to trial. Instead, he pleaded guilty and spent three years in Atoka.

Now he was on Rikers Island awaiting trial in a related drug case. This time, the charge was "conspiring" to sell drugs. The new indictment accused Mel of two incidents of drug dealing—both of which he'd already served time for. But since "conspiring" to sell drugs is a different crime from selling them, Mel was facing another possible prison sentence. According to prosecutors, Mel had worked for a drug gang known as Dead Man Walking, which did a brisk business on the Lower East Side and had annual sales ex-

ceeding \$25 million.

Elaine got permission from her parole officer to visit Mel and went three times to Rikers Island during her first few weeks home. On a Friday in early March, she took me with her. "So you can see what we have to go through," she explained. Elaine thought that if more white people had relatives locked up for drug crimes, state legislators would have long ago rewritten the Rockefeller drug laws.

In fact, more than 94 percent of New York State's drug prisoners are African American or Latino. "When you give people power and authority, they just overdo it because it doesn't affect their sons and daughters," Elaine said. "They don't have to go through the pain and suffering we go through. They wouldn't be able

mates in the city's jails get 500,000 visits. Elaine herself has been making the trip to Rikers Island since she was a teen. Back then, whenever her brothers Kenneth or Don Juan went to jail, she would walk from her mother's house in Corona, Queens, to the bus stop next to the Rikers Island bridge. Later, when her boyfriend, Nate, got arrested, she would bring her children when she visited him. And now Tenéa was making her first trip to Rikers, sitting on Elaine's lap as the bus crossed the East River and the familiar stench of salt water and sewage filled the air.

It was 12:20 p.m., and Elaine wasn't looking forward to the rest of her day—to the metal detectors, pat frisks, dingy waiting rooms, gruff guards, slow lines. She wished she had good

Eventually, Mel went to prison for the same crime his mother, Elaine, committed: selling drugs to an undercover cop.

to deal with it, anyway."

Our journey to Rikers Island began at 11:50 a.m., when we boarded the F train on East Houston Street. Today, Elaine wore Apache's parka and Tara's Polo shirt. To give Tara a break, Elaine was bringing her granddaughter Tenéa to Rikers Island. Soon we were at Queens Plaza, lining up for the Q101. Elaine slipped her new MetroCard into the machine next to the bus driver, hiked her granddaughter above her hip, and headed down the aisle.

By now, Tenéa was 10 months old. A diaper bulged beneath her hot pink ski suit, and she wore tiny gold hoops in her ears. When Tenéa rode around the East Village in her stroller, strangers stopped to admire her sparkly brown eyes, long lashes, and near-constant grin. But now, as Elaine settled into a seat near the back of the bus, Tenéa was frowning. Worried eyes peered out beneath a white ski hat adorned with Baby Minnie Mouse. "You look like you know where you're going," Elaine said to her granddaughter.

For many New York families, the journey to Rikers Island is a familiar ritual. Each year, in-

news to report, but if she waited that long, well, who knew when she would see Mel? After clearing a security checkpoint, the Q101 turned into the parking lot of the visitors' center. A guard shouted his welcome. "No beepers or cell phones allowed inside!" Elaine knew the rules; she had left her beeper at home.

To get to the jail where Mel was housed, Elaine had to take another ride, this time aboard a refurbished school bus with ripped leather seats. As she exited, her gaze climbed the slate-gray walls of the Otis Bantam Correctional Center, searching for the tiny third-floor window belonging to her son.

Once inside, Elaine followed orders. She stuck out one hand so a guard could stamp the back with invisible ink. She dropped Tenéa's Winnie-the-Pooh diaper bag on the metal detector's conveyor belt. She walked to the front of the waiting room and gave a card with Mel's name to the officer behind the desk. She picked a locker, slid in a quarter, and snuffed her earrings, parka, and diaper bag inside.

Elaine settled into a front-row seat. She
See GONNERMAN page 50



PRISON POLAROID: ELAINE'S REUNION WITH NATE

GONNERMAN from page 46

had waited more than 16 years to leave prison, and since coming home she still seemed to spend most of her time waiting—for her parole officer, for her welfare caseworker, for a chance to see Mel. Being trapped in the slow grind of yet another bureaucracy always left her feeling frustrated. "There's no time to waste," she often said. To pass the minutes, Elaine bounced her granddaughter on her lap. "Te-naaay-a!" Elaine sang. "Te-naaay-a!" The attention did little to improve the infant's mood; every few minutes, Tenéa spit her pacifier onto the floor.

The guard at the front of the waiting room called out a few prisoners' names, but not Mel's. After more than 30 minutes, Elaine considered asking the guard at the front how much longer she would have to wait. On her last visit to Rikers, she had asked the same question. "Did you

Mel was proud of his mother, of how she had survived such a long prison sentence with her dignity intact. 'My moms is what keeps me strong,' he said.

hear me call his name?" the guard had shouted. "All right, then, we didn't call it. Have a seat."

After years of being yelled at by women and men in gray uniforms, Elaine did not think she could take much more. She had wanted to scream back, but she forced herself to stay silent. She didn't want her parole officer to hear she had tussled with a Rikers guard. Today, Elaine decided, she would not ask questions.

An hour passed, and the guard finally put down her cigarette, picked up the phone, and called Mel's last name. "Paschall!" Elaine joined the line. When she got to the front, an officer told Elaine to remove Tenéa's Baby Minnie cap. Hats are banned.

"No one told me that," Elaine said. "This is my steady post," said the guard. "I'll tell you what you can bring in."

Silently, Elaine plodded back to her locker, then returned to the end of the line. A few minutes later, she finally made it past the metal detector. An officer whisked her through a large room buzzing with visitors and prisoners and into another, quieter visiting room, which contained several cages, each holding one table and a few chairs. The guard gestured toward a cage in the back corner.

Mel had to see visitors inside a cage because he was confined under Rikers' highest level of security. He had been assigned to the Bing, officially known as the Central Punitive Segregation Unit, which is reserved for New York City's worst-behaved prisoners. For fighting with another inmate, Mel had been slapped with 90 Bing days. Now he was locked in a 70-square-foot cell for 23 hours a day, and he received meals through a slot in the door.

Elaine carried her granddaughter inside the cage. It was 2:30 p.m., about two hours since she had arrived on the island. She stared through the steel bars at the parade of men entering the visiting area and tried to force a smile. It wasn't easy. Coming to Rikers meant confronting not only a slow-moving bureaucracy but also her own mistakes, guilt, and regrets. If she had never gone to prison, Elaine thought, Mel would now be passing the hours earning a paycheck or a degree instead of more Bing days.

Soon a familiar face appeared. Mel lit up as he neared the cage and realized who had come to see him. "Maaaaa!" he shouted.

Before he could embrace his mother, Mel had to wait for an officer to unlock the cuffs

holding his hands behind his back. The short, scrawny boy who had come to see Elaine in prison—who had smiled at her for years from the Polaroids decorating her cell walls—had disappeared. Across from Elaine sat a six-foot-two-inch man who shaved his head to hide a bald spot.

Mel could pass for 30, though he was seven years younger. He wore the jail's orange jumpsuit, accessorized with Versace glasses and Tommy Hilfiger sandals. His biceps bulged, the result of tens of thousands of push-ups and pull-ups he had done in his years behind bars. And along his right cheek, a jailhouse enemy had left a signature with a razor blade, a 12-stitch scar interrupting Mel's carefully trimmed beard.

"How have you been?" Mel asked. "I'm all right," Elaine lied.

She handed Tenéa to Uncle Mel, and immediately the baby began to cry. "Are you scared of the orange jumpsuit?" Elaine asked. She took Tenéa back and began to rock her.

"Did you hear me on the radio?" she asked Mel. The morning after her release, Elaine spoke on WBAI about the Rockefeller drug laws.

"I was listening and I had a couple people listen also."

"Did you hear me talk about you?" "I caught a little bit of it, but my batteries were really going."

Before his mother left prison, Mel had not seen her for seven or eight years. To learn details about her criminal case and clemency campaign, he had studied the news stories about her. Mel was proud of his mother, of how she had survived such a long prison sentence with her dignity intact. When she spoke, he held her hands and listened. He did not talk back. Here, in jail, Elaine's own 16-year imprisonment gave her a certain authority, at least in the eyes of her younger son. "My moms is what keeps me strong," Mel told her later.

Mel kept a picture of his mother on his cell wall, and he had written a song for her:

*I never asked for this life
It was given to me
Everything was all good
Or you pretended it be
Never told me about the world
And the struggle for dreams
Left when I was seven
Not even near to my teens...*

After he went to prison, Mel became a father. Little Mel, now four years old, lived with his mother in Queens. Mel had not seen his son in more than a year.

"Why didn't you bring Little Mel?" he asked. Elaine rolled her eyes. Tensions between Mel and his baby's mother had made it nearly impossible for Elaine to see her grandson.

"You gotta come home and deal with your own shit," Elaine said.

The conversation darted from Mel's siblings to his court case to his girlfriends to the weather to prison radicals like Assata Shakur and the Soledad brothers. (Mel said he was reading about them.) There were too many topics and not enough time. The time limit for all Bing visits is one hour, and soon a guard would appear at the cage door. Elaine decided not to tell her son she had been clashing with his sisters; she did not want to burden him with problems he couldn't fix. And Elaine knew he was not telling her about the pressure that led to his stint in the Bing.

"Ma, you don't need to be coming here," Mel said. "You've already done enough time."

"Of course I'm going to come visit you," Elaine said. "I know what it's like when people say they're going to come visit and they don't."

The conversation continued even as a guard came by and cuffed Mel's wrists.

"I love you, Ma!" Mel shouted over his shoulder as the officer led him away. "I love you!"

"I love you too," she yelled. "Now, you behave!"

See GONNERMAN page 52

GONNERMAN from page 50

Across the room full of cages, Elaine watched her son as he stood in front of a door, waiting for an officer to escort him back to his cell. The steel cuffs kept him from waving, so he shouted one last goodbye.

"Ma, I love you!"

JOB HUNTING

One morning in mid March, six days after our trip to Rikers Island, Elaine pushed open the door to an employment agency. The banner hanging over the receptionist's window announced: "The South 40 Corporation: An Avenue From Prison to Society." Elaine wrote her name on a sign-in sheet, then picked a seat next to the magazine rack holding *Vanity Fair* and *Corrections Today*.

A fellow ex-con she met at WBAI had told Elaine about South Forty, and so here she was in its waiting room on the 12th floor of a building near Penn Station. She recognized the agency's name because it used to have counselors working inside Bedford Hills, advising prisoners on how to find a job. That was before 1991, when the state prison system cut funding for South Forty's "transitional services."

Seven weeks of job hunting had failed to yield any offers. Elaine needed help. A few hours later, Elaine sat next to the desk of George Lino, then one of South Forty's vocational specialists. Elaine liked that George wore a suit and tie, that he strode purposefully between the office's cubicles, and that he understood her plight. "I'm an ex-offender," said George, who was 29. "I did seven years, from age 17 to 23."

Before she went to prison, Elaine's résumé was blank. She had collected welfare and worked off-the-books at a beauty salon on 125th Street, braiding hair and doing manicures. When she left Bedford Hills, Elaine carried copies of a three-page résumé, which she had typed on a prison computer. It listed her diploma from Mercy College, which had sent teachers into the prison, and described several prison jobs, including program aide at the Children's Center next to the visiting room. It also mentioned the many certificate courses Elaine had completed, from "Basic Legal Research" to "Microsoft Word 6.0" to "Alternatives to Violence."

"You've got a lot of skills," said George, as he flipped through the résumé. "You could do a lot of things. But I need to know: Where do you want to go? What do you want to do?"

"Counseling," Elaine said. "I could do that. I enjoy speaking. I speak out about the Rockefeller drug laws. Also, I'm fascinated by computers. I need something I can grow in. I don't want something I'm stuck in. I'm tired of being stuck."

"Let's say we get you into counseling, because it's not easy to get into the computer field without any serious computer background."

South Forty finds jobs for more than 1000 ex-cons a year. Many become janitors, dishwashers, or cooks. Others work on the phone as dispatchers or survey takers. Elaine's associate's degree gave her an advantage over most ex-cons, and George figured he could get her an \$18,000- to \$20,000-a-year counseling job. If she had a bachelor's degree, he could probably get her between \$25,000 and \$30,000. He could tell she had a lot of ambition, that prison had not crushed her initiative. Jobless ex-prisoners sometimes came to South Forty and stopped outside the front door, waiting for someone to buzz them in, even though the door was unlocked. Prison had left them so institutionalized that they would have a tough time thriving in a job.

Elaine was pleased that George did not view her as a future janitor or McDonald's order taker, because she certainly did not see herself in such minimum-wage work. After she appeared on WBAI a few weeks earlier, the radio host told her about a friend who needed somebody to clean her house. "Baby, I am not a

maid," Elaine replied. "I didn't get out of prison after 16 years to clean toilets."

George informed Elaine that a recruiter from a large social service agency was coming to South Forty that day to conduct a grant interview. "Do you have time to go home to change?" he asked.

Elaine glanced down at her clothes. Blue flare-bottom pants, black boots with a chunky heel. Tara had picked out the outfit from her own wardrobe, laying it out that morning for her mother.

"I gotta change?" Elaine asked. "What do I wear?"

"Do you have any suits or skirts?" "No."

An hour or so later, Elaine walked into the offices of Dress for Success, a nonprofit that gives away used business clothes to women entering the workforce. She carried a referral from George, and soon a female volunteer was riffling through the racks in search of a size-16 outfit. Then Elaine peeled off her club kid clothes and slipped into the uniform of a corporate executive: panty hose, fake-pearl earrings, a bright red skirt, and a matching suit jacket with gold buttons on the front.

The skirt suit was slightly baggy, and the used pumps were size 12, two sizes too large. But Elaine did not complain. Marching stately up Eighth Avenue, back toward South Forty, she said, "It feels good to have people fussing over me after all these years."

As it turned out, the recruiter who came to South Forty needed custodians, not counselors. Elaine wasn't too worried. With George's help, she thought, she could do better. "You brought a reporter?" one ex-con whispered to her after the group interview. "They're definitely going to get you a job," Elaine laughed.

Over the next few weeks, Elaine stopped in to see George several times. He sent her to a résumé-writing workshop and a seminar on what to say during a job interview. He expanded her wardrobe by sending her a Bottomless Closet, another nonprofit that gives free business clothes to poor women. By the time she left, Elaine needed an enormous shopping bag to hold all her loot.

When the volunteers offered her a jacket, Elaine asked for two. She grabbed a handful of free beauty products—lipstick, pressed powder, cologne, eye shadow, concealer, eye pencils, and hair spray—even though she only wears lipstick and eyeliner. When the volunteers told her she was allowed one piece of jewelry, she persuaded them to let her take three items: a pair of fake-pearl earrings, a necklace, and a gold pin decorated with a red rose that in script said "Mom."

UPTOWN ESCAPE

By late March, two months after she left prison, Elaine had resorted to detective work in an attempt to understand her children's lives. She went to Danae's school to check on her grades. She copied down the doctors' names on Tara's pill bottles. She sought out Mel's lawyer to find out what was going on with his case. She attended Apache's basketball games, learned the names of his players, and cheered for his teams.

Still, there was so much Elaine didn't know. When Danae's 13th birthday arrived, Elaine gave her \$20 to buy a cake because she wasn't sure what flavor her younger daughter liked. Danae chose strawberry. "I never would have guessed that," Elaine said.

No matter how hard Elaine tried, the reality of her relationships with her daughters did not come close to matching her expectations. Over the years, Tara and Danae had written about how much they missed her, how their lives would be better as soon as she was home again. But that wasn't coming true. "All the times you wrote me in prison—now I'm home, it's a whole different story," Elaine said to

See GONNERMAN page 57

GONNERMAN from page 52
her daughters. "Was it all lies?"

Tara and Danae had never known their mother outside of prison, and to her daughters, she probably seemed to be meddling. But in her own mind, the respect and authority a mother should be accorded were missing. Elaine clashed with Tara, telling her she spent too much time "laying up" with her boyfriend. She also continued ordering Danae to move home, and Danae continued to defy her. Some days, Danae scabbed her mother, refusing to acknowledge her when they passed on the street. Some nights, Tara refused to sleep in the same bed with her mother and instead took her pillow to the living room.

Elaine had tried not to let prison make her bitter. Inside Bedford Hills, she had figured out how to harness her rage, how to stop fighting other inmates and fight the system instead. She prayed every night and hit a punching bag in the gym. But now that she was home, she seemed to be losing her grip. She could not rid herself of all her disappointment, hurt, and rage. Confiding in her mother might have made her feel better, but of course, her mother had passed away. And Nate, her daughters' father, was not around.

Some days, her fury felt unstoppable. "What's wrong with you?" she would scream at her daughters when they were not acting the way she thought they should. It was all she could do not to beat them up. "You treated me better when I was in prison!" she hollered at Danae during one fight. "I wish I hadn't come home to you and your stupid sister!"

In her children's apartment, Elaine felt as though she were living in a nightclub. The phone rang all night long. There was always at least one television blaring, and sometimes three or four. At night, the number of friends and boyfriends crashing in the apartment pushed its population to 10 or more. Nobody here had a job. Compared to the highly structured world of Bedford Hills—where guards had unlocked her cell each day at 6 a.m. and shut off the lights at 10:30 p.m.—life in the apartment was utter chaos.

She felt as though nobody wanted her around. People ignored her. Conversations halted when she walked by. "This is the most uncomfortable apartment I've ever been in," she said. On her way home, Elaine often stopped outside the entrance to her building, sat on a wooden bench, and stared at the sky. She considered curling up and spending the night outdoors. "You're free, Elaine," she would tell herself. "At least things aren't as bad as they were." Usually, this mantra was enough to get her off the bench and into the elevator.

Elaine had overheard enough to figure out that some family members were unhappy about her media attention, about her sacrificing their privacy to win her freedom. She knew her own mother would not have approved of such publicity. Yvonne was so proud and private that she did not allow Elaine to send letters from Bedford Hills directly to her imprisoned brothers because people might find out her brothers were locked up. "You don't let people know your whole family is in jail," Yvonne would say. "It's embarrassing."

Elaine began to fantasize about escaping, collecting her plastic bags and moving into her own place. She longed for a housing project apartment like the one she rented before she went to prison. Back then, she paid \$127 a month for a three-bedroom apartment in the Wagner Houses.

While she was in prison, the New York City Housing Authority began doing more rigorous background checks. It became much tougher for anyone with any sort of criminal record to lease. Renters who shared an apartment with someone who had a criminal record faced possible eviction. The background checks were popular with tenants, who wanted to stop their projects from becoming open-air drug markets.

But for an ex-prisoner like Elaine, a ban based on a 17-year-old drug bust created yet another obstacle in an already formidable housing hunt.

The longer she stayed in the apartment, the more trouble she had controlling her temper. Occasionally her sister Sabrina offered advice, telling her not to drive away Tara's boyfriend. "They're gonna do what they're gonna do," Sabrina told Elaine. "Don't let them block your way." Other days, the sisters would fight, and Elaine became convinced Sabrina did not want her around either. The message was not always subtle. "If your parole officer comes here," Sabrina threatened during one argument, "I'm going to tell him we don't want you."

In late March, 56 days after Elaine moved in, she got into a minor squabble with Sabrina that quickly escalated into an all-out war. It began with Sabrina hollering down the apartment hallway.

"Who ate my cheese?" Sabrina yelled. "Who ate my cheese?"

In her children's apartment, Elaine felt as though she were living in a nightclub. The phone rang all night long. There was always at least one television blaring, and sometimes three or four.

Elaine hadn't taken the cheese, but to get her sister to shut up, she screamed back. "I ate your cheese!"

Sabrina was infuriated by this answer, and the two sisters tore into each other. The fight laid bare every pent-up family resentment.

"You stupid ass!" Sabrina shouted. "You went to jail. You hurt Mommy. You're the one that broke her heart by going to jail!"

Elaine had heard enough. She was tired of feeling unwanted, of being blamed for all that had gone wrong. She began stuffing her possessions—her skirt suits and résumés and high heels—into plastic bags. The only place left to go was her sister Michelle's home in Harlem—a five-bedroom apartment she already shared with her husband, five children, a grandson, and three of Sabrina's children.

Elaine hunted for the plastic water bottle she used as a bank and dumped the contents onto Tara's bed. Her dollar bills had disappeared long ago, so she counted the quarters and dimes. Elaine did not have \$25 for the minivan. She would have to get Michelle to send down her husband with some money so she could pay the driver when she got to Harlem. She would also have to call her parole officer to tell him she was changing addresses lest he send her back to jail for violating parole rules.

Elaine had been determined to be a role model for her children, to show her family a way of life that did not revolve around cashing welfare checks or watching soap operas every afternoon. But now she did not think she could rebuild her own life while living in her children's apartment. It had taken two months for the dream to crumble. Her brother Kenneth was right. She would have to love her family from a distance.

The crises did not end when Elaine changed homes. Soon she was bickering with her youngest sister, too, though she could not explain exactly why. She didn't like living in someone else's house, obeying someone else's rules. One night, she sat in Michelle's lobby for three hours, surrounded by all her belongings, while she waited for Apache to help her move again. He never showed, so she dragged her

See GONNERMAN page 58

GONNERMAN from page 57

plastic bags back upstairs to Michelle's apartment. Every day, Apache called to make sure his mother had not gone to a homeless shelter.

BROOKLYN RESPITE

Elaine usually made an effort to look put-together, if not professional, when she went to South Forty to see George. But on a Tuesday morning in mid April, she showed up at the employment agency in jeans and a T-shirt. Hours of nibbling had left her once long nails stubby and uneven. And the circles around her eyes had grown so dark that she looked as if she had been punched in the face.

A few days earlier, George had set up her first official job interview—to be a case manager at the Center for Community Alternatives, a Manhattan nonprofit that tries to keep people out of prison. Elaine wore a Liz Claiborne outfit from the Bottomless Closet to meet one of the agency's directors.

"Miss Lasson feels you did really well," George said. "You looked fantastic. The only thing is she said you came very early."

Elaine had indeed showed up early—90 minutes before her scheduled interview. "The more I waited, the nervous I got," she explained.

Now she opened her pocketbook, a loan from Tara, and hunted for the thank-you note George had told her to send to her prospective employer. The night before, while a television blared and her young nephews raced up and down the hallway of Michelle's home, Elaine had handwritten a letter to her interviewer. In the midst of so much chaos, such social niceties seemed slightly absurd. But if this was what she had to do to get a job, she would play by the rules.

Since she did not have a permanent home, Elaine kept every important piece of paper with her. She rifled through her purse, past her prison release certificate, her birth certificate, her plastic change purse, her Medicaid card, her address book, notes from friends at Bedford Hills, and Nate's letters. There was so much stuff in the pocketbook that it took a few minutes to locate her thank-you note.

Unlike most ex-cons, Elaine carried in her purse a notebook with plastic sleeves containing the business cards of state legislators, reporters, and activists. Almost everyone Elaine had met since coming home promised to help, nodding sympathetically when she told them her story. Still, despite three months of hustling, everywhere she turned she seemed to confront a dead end.

Elaine finally pulled out her thank-you note and handed it to George. By now, her eyes had grown moist. "All the people who are supposed to be helping me aren't doing anything," she said. "I'm fed up."

"Talk to me," said George.

She blinked hard a few times to stop her tears. "This whole thing is a joke," she said. About the agencies she had called for help, she added, "They say they're going to get back to you and they never do."

If anyone had phoned her back, though, Elaine might not know. The phone company had disconnected the local service when no one paid the bill. And her family sometimes forgot to pass on messages.

George did not know the details of Elaine's travails, but he could see that her situation was urgent. What was the point of finding Elaine a job if family crises derailed her—if they kept her from showing up to work on time and staying focused? George knew Elaine needed another place to live, so he wangled her an appointment later that day at the Women's Prison Association. The agency sometimes provides ex-cons with emergency housing. After Elaine told her story, a caseworker booked her a room for 10 nights at the YMCA in Greenpoint, Brooklyn.

A few hours later, Elaine boarded the G train, a subway line she had never ridden be-

fore, to get to Greenpoint, a neighborhood she had never heard of until that day. After getting slightly lost, she found the YMCA, where the signs in the lobby are written in Polish. Elaine's neighbors were European tourists paying \$55 a night for a room with a color TV and double bed, plus access to a weight room and swimming pool.

Ever since she left prison, Elaine had been dreaming of taking a vacation. Usually, she imagined herself on a beach in Jamaica, sipping a piña colada and lying next to a very attractive man. The Greenpoint YMCA seemed an unlikely spot for a holiday, but for the moment, it would have to do. Elaine tried to forget that the view from the lobby included the 94th police precinct, a sight that did not relax her. At least she could stay here for free, and the Women's Prison Association gave her a daily stipend of \$10—enough for two meals if she planned carefully. She just had to call her parole officer and tell him she was moving.

Over the next few days, Elaine transformed Room 305 into a home. She got her clothes from Michelle's apartment, folded them, and placed them in the dresser drawers. She turned the window sill into a kitchen cupboard, lining it with cans of pear halves and applesauce, two bottles of cranberry juice, and a box of Apple Jacks.

Armed with a stack of quarters, she took over the phone in the YMCA's stairwell. For an hour or two each day, the phone booth became her personal office. She made calls to George, Apache, her caseworker at the Women's Prison Association—anyone she thought could help. She didn't call her sisters or daughters to tell them where she had gone. She wanted them to worry, at least for a few days.

At the YMCA, Elaine alternated between appreciating the quiet and feeling lonely. She knew only two or three people in Brooklyn, and none of them lived in Greenpoint. One day, she saw somebody she recognized—an ex-con from Bedford Hills, who was also staying at the YMCA. They did not talk long, though. Hanging out with this particular woman, Elaine figured, would take her straight back to prison.

The longest conversation Elaine had with anyone she met in Greenpoint took place the evening a man who lived down the hall invited her out. The man barely came up to her shoulder, so in her mind, she dubbed him "Shorty." At a nearby bar, she ordered a piña colada and sat with Shorty and his three friends.

"Tell me about yourself," Shorty said. Elaine rolled her eyes. "You don't even want to know," she said. "We're not going to go there." "I'll be your shoulder to cry on," Shorty offered.

"Your little shoulders couldn't handle my cries right now," Elaine said.

After just one drink, Elaine decided Shorty was boring and got up to leave. Just after midnight, loud banging on her door woke her. A drunken Shorty wanted to come in. "You've got the wrong woman, buddy," Elaine told him through the door. Then she went back to bed. A few days later, she bought a plastic purple radio and put it on the night table next to her bed to keep her company.

SECOND HOMECOMING

In early May, 13 weeks after she left prison and while she was still living at the YMCA, Elaine landed a full-time job. Project Renewal, a nonprofit agency, hired Elaine to work at its homeless shelter on East 3rd Street, just off the Bowery. Compared to most ex-cons, she was doing well. Only 42 percent of New York's parolees have full- or part-time jobs.

Elaine's new workplace was a six-story brick building holding 200 male drug addicts. Many had spent years sleeping in subway cars and on sidewalks; others had cycled in and out of jail. Elaine chuckled at the irony of her own

See GONNERMAN page 66

GONNERMAN from page 58

predicament. "Here I am working in a homeless shelter," she said, "and I feel homeless myself."

Elaine's job title was residential aide, and her duties included answering phones, enforcing curfews, and inspecting the men's lockers. On days when she had to search for contraband—which included drugs, knives, and even cell phones—she felt as though she were back in prison, this time as a guard.

Though she was a staff member, Elaine empathized with the clients. She even remembered two men from 20 years ago, when they all lived in the same housing project. "I ain't even been home four months yet, and I understand how you feel about rules and regulations," she told the men when they complained. "You don't want anybody telling you what to do."

Elaine began to acquire a routine. Five days a week, Tuesday through Saturday, she worked from 4 p.m. to midnight. The schedule technically violated her parole—her curfew was still 9 p.m.—but her parole officer gave her permission to work at night. Now she had less time for jail visits and apartment hunting, but going to work every day usually improved Elaine's mood.

As a bonus, the men who surrounded her—all the male clients plus dozens of male coworkers—proved to be an ego boost. Elaine could still turn heads. One coworker gave her a bottle of Victoria's Secret perfume and a plastic rose that lit up when she squeezed the stem. Another took her on a shopping spree at a drugstore and also to Dallas BBQ on St. Marks Place.

Saving money became Elaine's top priority. She worked double shifts. She opened her first bank account—with \$15. She paid her first taxes. After taxes, her twice-monthly paychecks totaled \$493.42. Elaine was earning about \$10 an hour, or \$18,000 a year. It was better than McDonald's wages—and much better than the 25 cents an hour she earned in prison—out after she put half her paycheck in the bank to save for an apartment, there was little left. To save money, she ate one meal a day.

Though Elaine was still living in the YMCA, she would often stop by her children's apartment. Relations with her family were less fraught now that she had somewhere else to sleep. When Tenéa's first birthday arrived in early May, Tara decided to throw a party in a local community center. Elaine's mother had given Tara the nickname "Pocahontas," so Elaine scoured five-and-dime stores for paper plates and napkins decorated with the character from the Disney film.

At 4 p.m., three hours before the party was to begin, Elaine stood on a fold-out chair at the community center, tying streamers to the rafters. A deejay brought a stack of rap albums and a bubble machine. Elaine's sister, Michelle, brought enough fried chicken and collard greens and potato salad for 100 people. About 75 family members and friends showed up, and Tenéa surveyed the scene from her stroller, wearing a paper Pocahontas headband and bobbing her head to the beat.

Later, Elaine swayed to the music, holding her granddaughter. As strangers came by to tell the birthday girl how adorable she was, Elaine beamed. This was the sort of family event she had looked forward to all those years she was stuck in prison. A few hours into the bash, Elaine went outside to smoke. When she came back, Tara handed her a paper plate with a slice of Carvel ice cream birthday cake. Tara had saved the best piece, the one with Pocahontas's face, for her mother.

One week later, Elaine left the YMCA and moved back into the East Village apartment with Tara and Apache. Though the Women's Prison Association had promised her only 10 nights at the YMCA, she had always hoped to stay longer. In the end, she convinced a caseworker to allow her to stay five and half weeks before she was finally cut off in mid-May.

Back in the apartment, Elaine vowed not to lash out at her sister and daughters. Now when something rankled Elaine—when she opened the kitchen cupboard and roaches jumped out, or when Sabrina woke her at 4 a.m. to burn a cigarette—she tried to keep her mouth shut. This time, she moved into Apache's bedroom in order to give Tara a chance to spend more time with her boyfriend.

Apache's small bedroom was the de facto headquarters for Exodus, his AAU basketball club. Copies of *Slam*, the basketball magazine, covered the night table; game schedules were taped to the wall above his bed. The room was not much larger than the king-size bed it held, and Elaine's arrival made it feel even more crowded. She hung her business suits from Apache's curtain rods and slept next to him at night.

While most 26-year-old men would not be

Ever since she left prison, Elaine had been dreaming of taking a vacation. Usually, she imagined herself on a beach in Jamaica, sipping a piña colada and lying next to a very attractive man.

thrilled about sharing a bedroom with their mother, Apache did not complain. As always, his sense of humor helped him cope. "Ma, it's 11:37," he said one day, after she began working the 12 p.m.-to-8 p.m. shift. "You gotta get to work." Elaine jumped up out of bed and ran down the hall to the shower. Within minutes, she had pulled on one of Apache's sweaters, black Spandex tights, and a pair of shiny orange boots. The outfit was less conventional than her usual work attire, but it would have to do. She headed for the door and speed-walked to work.

Not long afterward, Apache's phone rang. "You've got jokes, son," said Elaine. Apache laughed. It was only 9:30 a.m.—his mother was two and half hours early for work. "Who did you have hiding in the stairwell that you are trying to sneak in?" she asked.

No women were sneaking in that day, though Apache's girlfriends were a favorite target. "Whoever you got in there has got to go," Elaine said to her son on the phone one evening. "Send their asses home, I'll be home by 9, so the room better be cleaned up by then." She put down the phone and rolled her eyes in mock anger. "Him and his girls need their own damn room," she said.

During her last years in prison, after her mother passed away, Apache was the one who helped keep her sane, visiting regularly and giving her pep talks on the phone. Now that she was home, Apache still worried about his mother. "I know she's trying to find her place in the world," he told me. "She thought her purpose was to take care of her kids and her kids have turned their backs on her. They don't want her around. How devastating could that be? I know it's hurting bad. It will probably improve with the years, but it might be too late."

Elaine dreamed of finding an apartment large enough for her, Apache, Danae, Tara, and Tenéa. She wasn't sure if she could convince her daughters to live with her, but she wanted to be close by so that they could visit. And she wanted to have enough room so her grandchildren could stay sometimes, too. This way, she figured, she would get to spend more time with Little Mel and also Baby Tara, Apache's five-year-old daughter, who lived

See GONNERMAN page 69

GONNERMAN from page 66

with her mother. "I need a home to create a family," Elaine said.

Caseworkers at the Women's Prison Association advised Elaine that her only immediate option was a single-room occupancy hotel, where tenants pay by the week for the bare necessities—a cot, a shared bathroom, an electrical outlet. They found an opening at an SRO in Brooklyn, but Elaine refused to visit. "I don't want a room," she said. "I want a home."

When Elaine walked by the many housing projects scattered around the East Village and Lower East Side, she scanned the windows for any sign of vacancies. Though the New York City Housing Authority does not give leases to felons, Elaine learned that the agency does make exceptions for ex-cons who can prove they have been "rehabilitated." So she filled out an application and got two state legislators to write letters saying she had reformed. Even if she did manage to qualify for a project apartment, the wait would likely be more than a year.

Elaine hoped to remain in the East Village, where she was beginning to feel at home. She had a 15-minute walk to work, and she'd memorized the location of every store with a shoe sale along Second Avenue. The cashier at the bodega near her job knew her. "Hey, honey," he called when she strolled in, "what can I get you today?" But there was no place for her in this rapidly gentrifying neighborhood, where three-bedrooms rent for \$3000 a month.

As June arrived and the weather grew warmer, Elaine's mood plummeted. She'd had a clear vision of what she wanted to accomplish: to get a job, then an apartment. Her stay at the YMCA had rejuvenated her and helped clear her head. But now she felt as though things were fuzzy again. On her days off from work, she retreated to Apache's bedroom, locked the door, and slept all afternoon. She let the answering machine pick up Apache's telephone. She stopped returning calls. Elaine was not sure what would happen to her, but she worried her story would not have a happy ending.

Apache had lived in the apartment's largest bedroom before Elaine came home. But when his mother first moved in, Apache had swapped rooms with his sister Tara so that she and Elaine could have the back bedroom. Now that Apache and Elaine were sharing space, they decided to reclaim the largest bedroom.

On a Thursday morning in early July, Apache and Elaine began moving their possessions into the apartment's hallway. They pushed Apache's bed and dresser into the corridor and piled her outfits on top. Meanwhile, Tara sat on her bed and refused to budge. "I'm not moving," she said. Elaine ignored her and kept working, scrubbing Apache's now empty room with disinfectant.

A few minutes later, somebody pounded on the front door. Elaine looked down the corridor and saw three cops in the doorway.

"We got a call about a domestic dispute," an officer said.

No police contact. Elaine remembered parole's rule. She knew this encounter could send her back to jail. She suspected Tara's boyfriend had called the officers; earlier, she remembered, she'd heard him say, "They're coming." Now, instead of hiding in a bedroom, Elaine walked down the corridor to the doorway. "I just got out of prison after 16 years," she explained to the cops. "Governor Pataki sent me to this address. So if there's a problem with that, tell him. File a report because something has to be done."

She gestured around the apartment, at the bare bulbs, the dirty ceiling, the cluttered foyer. "I'm a mother coming home after all these years," she said. "Would you want your children living like this?"

Tara slipped outside the apartment with the cops. Depending on what Tara told them, Elaine knew, she could wind up on Rikers Island. Afterward, Apache and Elaine pulled Tara into the back bedroom and closed the door.

"I can't believe you let your man call the cops on your mother!" Apache shouted.

"What did I ever do to warrant this?"

Elaine yelled. "There's nothing but negativity in this house. You should want something better for Tenéa. I didn't come home to put my hands on you and your sister, but y'all don't want I've been through in the last 16 years."

Tara stared at her feet. She said nothing. Elaine picked up the phone to call her parole officer. She had to report the incident, and she wanted Tara to understand that one call to the cops could undo everyone's efforts to free her. The parole officer recorded the incident in Elaine's file, but decided not to lock her up.

The way Elaine recounts the argument, it was not about real estate, but about the future—about two opposing attitudes, about whether Tara would take charge of her life or continue to sit around the apartment and be unhappy. Elaine figured if she had been younger, she probably would have beat Tara up after the officers left. But this time, Elaine did not hit anyone. She later said she felt more sad than angry.

A few days later, Elaine found a crumpled copy of the police report in Tara's room. If she needed any more evidence of how little she knew her older daughter, or how little her older daughter knew her, here it was. She skimmed the one-page report. Under "Victim," she saw Tara's name; under "Suspect," she saw her own. The description of the incident stated: "Both parties involved in verbal altercation over bedrooms. Settled w/o incident."

PRISON REUNION

As soon as Elaine began collecting paychecks, her wardrobe grew. Shopping became one of Elaine's favorite pastimes, a way to escape the apartment and see how styles had changed while she had been away. A good sale usually improved her mood, like the day she bought five pairs of shoes at Payless for \$9.99 each.

Elaine held on to the yuppie leftovers she had picked up for free during her first years home, but now she cruised the shops at St. Marks Place and East 14th Street. She bought a pink sequined cowboy hat, a black leather beret, skintight leopard-print capri pants, and something she referred to as her "hoochie mama" outfit, which featured a tie-on top and a skirt that barely reached mid thigh.

No item of clothing could be too attention-grabbing, at least in Elaine's opinion. Her children disagreed. "She thinks she's 25," Tara said.

When Elaine came home one day with a couple of toe rings, her older daughter rolled her eyes. "You're really getting young now," Tara said.

"This is the thing," Elaine explained. "I've got to keep up with the times. What do you want me to do? Be stuck in the 70s?"

As the summer weather grew hotter, and shorts and miniskirts replaced parkas and scarves, the city began to crackle with sexual energy. Getting dressed up and flirting with men became one of Elaine's favorite activities. And there seemed to be no shortage of suitors. Some hung around for a few days; others stuck around for months.

In Elaine's mind, dating was a sort of power game in which the underlying question was always "What can you do for me?" She wanted to be wined and dined, to be treated like a queen and spoiled with gifts. She convinced Ace, a man she met at a bodega, to lend her a diamond ring. (He had one on every finger.) When a suitor offered to buy her a thong and bra, she asked for a set of seven. "If you want me to wear 'em, give me a week's supply," she said. "I'm not going to be washing and wearing." And she persuaded the activist she met at her welcome-home party to keep giving her money. By now, she figured, she had collected at least \$1000.

Elaine knew that her long impr...

See GONNERMAN

GONNERMAN from page 76

directions. He joined the line of prisoners along the ramp leading toward the cell blocks. Elaine stood with the other inmates' relatives, next to the officers' desk. The couple watched each other across the room and tried to communicate without words. He blew kisses. She waved. After a few minutes, Elaine turned and faced the exit. She did not want Nate to see her tears. She did not want to leave. Tomorrow, Elaine vowed, she would come back to see Nate.

THANKSGIVING

By late fall, 10 months after Elaine left prison, she was still living in her children's apartment, still sharing a bed with her older son. Tensions with her daughters and sister had eased, though the family's peace remained fragile. Elaine's son

Mel had been shipped from Rikers Island to a state prison, a five-hour bus ride from Manhattan; she had not seen him in eight months.

By now, Elaine was journeying to Green Haven prison to visit Nate about once or twice a month, but she had not yet written the letter requesting another wedding. At her job, she continued to work so many hours that she had time for little else. "My life is kinda boring," she said in early November. "All I do is go to work and go home." And then she repeated her favorite saying: "I didn't come home for this."

As Thanksgiving approached, Elaine decided that she would organize a feast. Other holidays had slipped by without her taking charge. She had slept through most of Mother's Day, and her sister Michelle had cooked the family meals on Easter and July Fourth. Now Elaine felt ready to re-create the sort of party

her mother used to throw. Pulling it off would require days of fundraising, not to mention cleaning and cooking.

Elaine dipped into her savings and collected \$200 from Apache and \$250 from a new suitor. She scanned newspaper ads for sales and found a table and four-chair set for \$159. (The family had gone without a dining table since she threw out the broken one in January.) She sent the apartment's occupants to purchase pots, pans, a shower curtain, another toilet seat, a bathroom rug, and a curtain for the kitchen window.

Elaine worked until 3 p.m. on the day before Thanksgiving, so that night she stayed up until 5 a.m., cooking with Apache and Tara, then slept in a chair in the living room for a few hours. By mid morning she was back in front of the stove, stirring the turnips and checking

the turkey. With everything on schedule, she dressed for the occasion, donning a black hip-hugging skirt, a sparkly silver top, knee-high black boots, and a gray zip-up sweater with fake fur around the hood and wrists. "My mother looks like a cross between Charlie's Angels and Glenn Close in *101 Dalmatians*," Apache announced.

The Thanksgiving menu included two turkeys, a ham decorated with cherries and pineapple slices, two ducks, roast beef, roast pork, a giant platter of shrimp with cocktail sauce, potato salad, macaroni salad, macaroni and cheese, rice, yams, collard greens, turnips, eight sweet potato pies, and five peach cobbler pies. Plus, there was a sponge cake baked on the stove using an old prison method—sticking a cookie tin under the pan so it cooks more slowly.

See GONNERMAN page 31

GONNERMAN from page 79

Elaine had to work the 4 p.m.-to-12 a.m. shift, so she served dinner early. "C'mon, y'all!" she said, just before 3 p.m. "We're getting ready to eat." First, she ripped off a turkey leg and placed it on the floor for the apartment's newest member, Kira, her eight-week-old puppy. "Happy Thanksgiving, baby," she said to the dog. She carved the turkey and assigned Tara to heap the meat atop paper plates.

By now, the apartment's population had climbed to 17, including Tara, Tenéa, Sabrina, and Apache, and assorted friends and relatives. There wasn't enough room to sit at the table, so they scattered around the apartment. Elaine ate on a chair in the living room. Apache stood by the stove, Tara sat on a chair in the hallway across from her bedroom, next to an unplugged television and a laundry basket of plastic toys

Sabrina dined at the new table, then dozed in front of *One Life to Live*.

Even with so much food—even with "Happy Thanksgiving" napkins, the aroma of roast turkey drifting down the hall, and a new kitchen curtain decorated with pigs and ducks—something was not quite right. Nobody bickered, but nobody smiled, either. All the hours of cooking and cleaning could not replace what was missing. They could not mask the misery that seemed to permeate the apartment.

After everyone had taken seconds, there was still enough food left over for 50 people. Elaine covered tins with foil, hoping to keep food warm for more company. She had expected her youngest sister, Michelle, to come down from Harlem with 10 or so family members, but as it turned out they didn't show up until evening. Elaine had been hoping her

younger daughter would come, too. "Tara," Elaine shouted down the hall. "Call Na-na and ask her, does she think she could find her way over here and spend a little time with her mother before I have to go to work?"

A few minutes later, someone announced that Danae was asleep. Elaine did not rail or rant or grab the phone and call Danae herself. There was no point in getting angry anymore. "By the time she gets here, I'll be gone," Elaine said. Still, Elaine kept waiting. At 3:45 p.m., she picked up the phone and dialed her job. "This is Bartlett," she said. "I'll be there. So if I'm not there right at 4, don't panic."

It was nearly the end of her first Thanksgiving as a free woman. Looking back later on the afternoon, she would consider it a success. Not the happiest event, perhaps, but at least it was a start. In the months ahead, she had many more

goals she wanted to accomplish. She would keep making daily calls to the Housing Authority to check on her application for a project apartment. She would continue to work, to save money, to mother her children. She would try to make sure Danae graduated from high school, Tara went back to high school, Apache got his college degree, and Mel stayed out of further trouble.

For now, though, she had a job to get to. At 4:15, she headed down the corridor to Apache's room and returned wearing a long coat and the same black knit hat and fuzzy scarf she had worn the day she left prison. "Bye," she said. "I gotta go." And then she grabbed her pocketbook and walked out the door. □

This story was photographed with support from the Center on Crime, Communities & Culture of the Open Society Institute.

was part of her allure, that there was something irresistible about the possibility of taking a woman's second virginity. "All of them are looking at the fact that this woman has been away for 16 years," Elaine said. "Her husband's in prison and no man is calling for her. They're tripping over themselves to see who gets it first."

Elaine did not get seriously involved with any of her suitors. She liked to say she was holding out for someone who could take her to Jamaica. "The first nigger who gets me is going to have me on the white sand," she said. "I want to see prints on the sand."

For now, Elaine made do with going to a nail salon on Delancey Street to get palm trees painted on her fake nails. "That's as close to Jamaica as I'm going to get," she said. None of her suitors were able to give her what she really wanted—a Caribbean holiday or a furnished apartment or her own beauty salon to run. The men were always married or broke or both. "You don't have a job?" Michelle said to one suitor. "You need to own a shoe store to be able to afford my sizer."

Elaine's children took phone messages for her when the men rang, and they were not shy about giving their opinions. "Ma, that man is married and has a family," Tara said about the activist. "That's nasty and trifling."

"I'm not doing anything with him," Elaine said. "I'm not taking money from his kids."

Like a lot of women at Bedford Hills, Elaine swore the first thing she would do when she got out of prison was have sex. But now that she was home, life had suddenly become more complicated. She couldn't bring anyone back to her apartment. And it would be a parole violation for her to spend the night somewhere else—unless she got permission ahead of time. Anyway, how could she get seriously involved with anyone when Nate was still stuck in prison, doing time for her crime?

In some ways, Nate knew her better than anyone, even though they hadn't seen each other for years. Both had endured the sort of "in and sadness that is nearly impossible to describe. They both knew what it felt like to lose a family member while you're stuck behind bars, then arrive at the funeral wearing handcuffs, Elaine wore shackles to three family members' funerals—for two brothers and her mother—while Nate lost both of his parents, a brother, and a sister while in prison.

Early on a Sunday morning in mid July, Elaine finally traveled to Green Haven prison, which is nestled among the horse farms and \$350,000 houses of Dutchess County. It had taken six months to get permission from her parole officer to visit Nate. By the time she walked into the prison's visiting room—after taking a \$15 taxi ride and \$35 shuttle van, depositing \$50 in Nate's account, and pre-paying \$20 to take 10 Polaroids with him—she had spent \$120.

Elaine didn't tell Nate when she was coming because she did not want to raise his hopes. In case she was too broke to make the trip. She had invited me along, but then changed her mind at the last minute. Nate would want to see her alone, she thought. Later, both Elaine and Nate described their reunion.

It was the first time they had seen each other since 1984. The last time they visited together, they were both inmates at the Albany County jail. Nate and Elaine met in the mid 1970s, when she lived with her first husband—Apache and Mel's father—in the Wagner Houses in East Harlem. It was not a happy marriage. One day, her husband took the handle off the apartment door and locked her inside for hours. Another time, she hurried all the contents of the refrigerator at him. "If this is love," she recalled thinking, "I don't want any more of it."

Nate's mother lived next to Elaine on the fifth floor, and Elaine often saw him when he came to visit. She didn't know him well, but she knew he was handsome, so one night she in-

While they all sat around a table, she slipped her shoe off and began rubbing her toes against him. Nate did not take the bait. He did not want a girlfriend who already had two children. At the time, he was only a teenager, two years younger than Elaine.

But Nate could not erase from his mind the memory of that encounter. Of the tall, older girl who looked like a model. And so several weeks later, he knocked on Elaine's apartment door at 1 a.m., ostensibly looking for a friend. The woman who appeared in the doorway looked sleepy, with tousled hair and a silky red nightgown. Once again, Elaine invited Nate in.

When Nate and Elaine told me the story of their courtship, each described the other as the pursuer. Nate said he was surprised by Elaine's forwardness. Her response: "What was he doing knocking on my door at 1 a.m.?"

Both agree that this night was the beginning of their romance, which soon included walks in the park and trips to the movies. Nate had no intention of getting tied down. But it seemed that every time he slipped his key in the lock on his mother's door, Elaine appeared in her doorway. Nate wrestled with Apache and Mel and took them shopping for new clothes for Easter. And he fell in love with their mother. Eventually, the teenager became a family man.

Soon, Elaine was again traveling to Rikers Island—not to see her brothers this time, but to visit her boyfriend. In 1980, Nate pleaded guilty to selling cocaine and spent eight months in jail. Elaine boarded the bus with Apache, Mel, and Tara. When Nate did another eight months for a cocaine bust in 1982, Elaine again commuted to jail. By now, Danae had been born, so Elaine brought the four children to Rikers for family reunions. After his second stint on Rikers, Nate pledged to stop selling drugs and to turn his life around. By now he was 24. He got a job as a late-night custodian shampooing rugs in midtown offices.

Like most people she knew, Elaine had snorted cocaine at parties. But she had never sold drugs or worked as a courier. Then she met George Deets, who hung out at the beauty salon where she worked. Deets badgered Elaine to carry a package of cocaine to Albany. He promised \$2500 for the job. To Elaine, \$2500 was a lot of money; it would have paid her rent for more than a year and a half. Nate tried to discourage his girlfriend. "It doesn't sound right," he said. Elaine barely knew Deets. Plus, he was a white guy, which aroused Nate's suspicions. Elaine did not listen.

On a November morning in 1983, she snuck a package of cocaine wrapped in brown paper down the front of her jeans and walked out of the apartment. Nate watched her leave, but he knew he could not relax if he let her go to Albany alone. What if something happened to her? What would he tell Elaine's mother? Nate ran down the street, and together they climbed into a cab to go to the train station. That split-second decision changed his life forever.

Several hours later, Nate and Elaine were facedown on the floor of a room at the Monte Mario Motel in Albany with shotguns pointed at their backs. As it turned out, Deets was a police informant, and the buyers for the sale he had arranged were actually undercover state police officers.

Prosecutors made the couple an offer: Plead guilty, work as informants, and your prison sentence will be five years. Elaine could not imagine wearing a wire and returning to her neighborhood to set up her friends. She decided to go to trial, and she persuaded Nate to take the same risk. "Everything is going to be all right," she recalled saying. "They don't have anything on us." An all-white jury deliberated for 40 minutes before convicting them both.

At the time of their arrest, Elaine and Nate had known each other for eight years. They had had no wedding plans, but that was before the arrest, before their lives were turned up-

See GONNERMAN page 74

side down. If they got married, at least they would be able to visit each other while they were stuck in the Albany County jail. On January 26, 1984, a judge held a wedding for them in his chambers. The bride and groom both wore blue jeans—the same ones they'd been wearing when they got arrested. There was no diamond ring, no five-layer cake, no hidden garter belt, no Electric Slide.

A few minutes later, the same judge sentenced the newlyweds. On this day, the judge, "Maximum" John Clyne, lived up to his nickname. The Rockefeller drug laws required him to give each defendant a prison sentence of at least 15-years-to-life. For reasons the judge never explained, he added five years to Elaine's sentence and 10 to Nate's. The couple's honeymoon consisted of a trip to the jail's visiting room, where they talked on a phone for an hour, separated by a thick pane of glass.

For the next 16 years, they were allowed to trade letters and to speak on the phone for 15 or 20 minutes every six months. In the beginning, they wrote each other every day. Once Nate enclosed a few Polaroids of himself in the visiting room with another woman—a gift Elaine was none too thrilled to receive. Eventually, Elaine grew tired of writing and stopped. The last time Nate received a letter from Elaine was 1995 or 1996—he can't remember—but he saved all the letters she sent. He kept them under his prison cot in a shoebox. Nate continued to write Elaine, sometimes filling 10 or 20 sheets of yellow legal paper with his tight, slanted script. "Nate doesn't know how to write letters," Elaine said. "He writes books." Over the years, Elaine amassed hundreds of pages of letters from Nate. Before she left prison, she threw them out.

Now Elaine sat by a window in the prison visiting room and glanced around—at the vending machines, the children chatting with their fathers, the guards in gray uniforms. When was Nate going to appear? He had not been expecting anyone today, so he was not ready when the guard called him. He assumed the visitor was a childhood friend who came almost every week, and so he took his time showering and ironing his shirt. She had decided to dress conservatively—a long, loose-fitting dress and sling-back sandals. Nothing too risqué. An hour passed before Nate walked in.

"Where's my brother?" Nate asked the officer behind the front desk.

"Do you have a wife?" the officer asked.

"Yeah."

The officer pointed toward the wall of windows. "She's over there."

Nate's lips stretched into a giant grin, and he hurried over. When he reached Elaine, she did not stand up. She did not smile. Instead, she scowled.

"What took you so long?" she asked.

This was not the way things were supposed to go. Nate had been choreographing this moment for years, and in every scenario he imagined that Elaine jumped up, ran over to him, and wrapped her arms around him. Now he stood next to Elaine, waiting for her to get up and hug him.

"Can I get some love after all these years?" he said.

"No," she said. "I'm mad. You took too long to come down. I'm not coming anymore if you're going to take so long."

Nate bent down to hug her around the shoulders. Then he sat.

The couple studied each other. Nate could see that Elaine was bigger than she had been, that she had puffy circles under her eyes, that she hadn't changed her hairstyle. She looked older, of course, but still beautiful. He thought Elaine saw the fatigue in Nate's eyes, too. His Afro had disappeared, replaced by a shaggy bald pate. But he was in good shape, muscular and trim. Even in his prison greens, even at age 41, he still looked good, she thought, better than any of her recent suitors.

Before she could talk about anything else Elaine had to resolve one matter. A month before she left prison, Nate had sent her a letter revealing that six years earlier he had married somebody else. Elaine was stunned. Nate had never mentioned another wife in all the years of phone conversations they'd had. She figured he had women coming to visit, but she had never heard about another wedding. All these years, even after he sent her divorce papers she still thought of Nate as her husband.

After she received the letter, Elaine chose not to interrogate Nate over the phone. Some conversations, she decided, have to happen face-to-face.

"Look me in the eyes and tell me what happened," she said. "Don't make no excuses. Just stick to the facts. Don't tell me no fairy tale stories."

"She had cancer and was getting ready to die, so I asked her, did she want to get married," Nate said.

"C'mon, there's more to it than that," Elaine said. "Be a man about it—just come out and tell me you had feelings for her."

"Yeah, I had feelings for her, because she was there at a time when I was real vulnerable. I don't know why you wouldn't be happy for me: I'd be happy for you in a situation like that."

Soon after he left Albany County jail, Nate met Sharon, the sister of another prisoner's girlfriend. For eight years, she visited every weekend from the Bronx. Sharon was a social worker and had two kids of her own. In 1994, they married and applied for a conjugal visit. Sharon passed away before they could spend a night together.

Elaine felt better once she heard the truth about Nate's emotions, without any excuses or evasions. She couldn't stay too angry. After all, she had had a few prison boyfriends of her own. Plus, she had given him permission to see other women. "You ain't got nothing, so get one of your friends to hook you up with a girl to come see you," she told him after they got shipped to separate prisons. "Everybody needs somebody."

Now she and Nate sauntered over to the row of vending machines. Elaine slid in a fistful of coins and bought lunch: one bag of popcorn, one bottle of water, three packs of pancakes, one fish sandwich, one chicken sandwich. On a table by the window, they laid down paper napkins and spread out the picnic. After heating the popcorn in a nearby microwave, Nate fed it to Elaine, piece by piece.

Nate was hungry for any news of his daughters, whom he had not seen since he came to prison. Elaine's mother brought them to see Elaine, but she never took them to visit Nate. Yvonne blamed Nate for her daughter's imprisonment. Over the years, Nate had written letters to Tara and Danae, encouraging them to read and asking them about their report cards. In 16 years, he had received one letter from Tara and none from Danae.

Elaine told Nate about all she had endured since she came home. She told him how rundown the apartment was, how she was embarrassed to invite friends in, how no one understood her, how creepy it was to play the role of a guard at her job, how her daughters seemed to have forgotten her family's lessons, how they treated her better in jail than they did now that she was home, how sometimes Danae unforgotten her so much she wanted to punch her in the face.

"Don't hit her," Nate said. "You're going to make her resent you more. Why don't you sit down and talk to her?"

Elaine and Nate discussed how to deal with Danae.

"She is never going to forgive us," Elaine said.

"Why not?"

"She said we abandoned her when she was small."

"As time goes on, she'll heal from that."

See GONNERMAN page 76

GONNERMAN from page 74

They have every right to feel angry because we weren't in their life when they were small—taking them to the school, waiting for the school bus, picking them up, being at their school plays. We were supposed to be raising them, and we weren't there."

Inevitably, the conversation turned to the crime that sent them both to prison.

"Why weren't you man enough to stop me?" Elaine asked.

"Why didn't you listen to me?" Nate asked. It was the same exchange they had been having for years, and it always went around

They both knew what it felt like to lose a family member while you're stuck behind bars, then arrive at the funeral wearing handcuffs.

and around without any resolution. But now Nate wanted to make sure that Elaine enjoyed her freedom, that she didn't feel consumed by guilt because she got out of prison first.

"I forgive you," he said. "I take a lot of the blame. I should have stayed in the house."

She wished she could build a statewide "Free Nate!" campaign and bring him home. Since leaving Bedford Hills, she had carried a poster with his picture at two anti-Rockefeller-drug-law rallies, on the steps of City Hall and the State Capitol in Albany. When reporters interviewed her at these events, she told them about Nate.

Back when she was in Bedford Hills, however, Elaine had purposely avoided mentioning her codefendant to reporters. She and Nate had decided to push her case in the media and leave him in the background. It was a calculated strategy to focus on her, since they knew her clemency campaign had a better chance. Elaine may have been more culpable in the crime, but Nate was the one with a rap sheet. And Elaine was a woman, which made her far more sympathetic.

"I'm really proud of you," Nate said. "You were stronger than some of the dudes in here. A lot of them got less time and they're crying and complaining."

Elaine leaned her head on Nate's shoulder and he stroked her hair. The way her body responded to his—he could tell that she needed to be held. He kissed her face, pressing his lips against her eyelids, her forehead, her cheeks, her lips. They wrapped their arms around each other, never forgetting to keep their butts firmly glued to their plastic chairs. It was an awkward embrace, but they knew the rules. The sign on the officers' desk at the front of the room proclaimed: "No Lap Sitting/One Chair Per-Person."

Nate and Elaine examined each other carefully for clues to secrets they yet shared. He thought she kissed better now than she used to, though he didn't ask her if she had been practicing. She inspected his body and quizzed him on all his scars. The most visible one, the corn on the side of his right pinkie, testified to all the letters he'd written. When they posed for a Polaroid, he pulled up her dress to check out her legs.

Nate took Elaine's hand as they walked outside, into the prison yard next to the visiting room. Under the bright sun, the couple strolled along the yard's perimeter, around the picnic tables and next to the protective-custody wing. Trees loomed above the 30-foot concrete wall, beckoning the prisoners to come join them in the free world. It was almost like taking a walk in the park—if they shut their eyes and the protective-custody inmates stopped screaming for a moment. Outside, the rules about physical contact are more relaxed. After

a while, Nate lay on a picnic bench, resting his head in Elaine's lap.

She pulled a Newport from her pack. "You're still smoking?" Nate asked. "Why are you smoking? You don't got to smoke." "You're making me feel bad."

"You can do whatever you want." Elaine smoked half a cigarette, then stubbed it out. Nate was pleased. If not for his influence, he figured, she would have smoked three or four. He liked to give Elaine advice. He told her not to eat meat and to drink less coffee. When she was at Bedford Hills, he clipped articles about parenting and mailed them to her. Soon he would peruse women's magazines in the prison library, hunting for a new hairstyle for her.

Back inside the visiting room, the conversation swerved from topic to topic, from the Rockefeller drug laws to Green Haven's gangs to the future. "If I get out, we're going to do all the things we never did," Nate said. "I want to go on a cruise, see the world." Nate always preceded any talk about the future with "if." He was eligible for parole in 2008, but he had been in prison too long to assume that he would leave alive. He had already watched two prisoners die, including one who was stabbed in the yard a few days before his release.

"Do you want to get married again?" Nate asked.

The question did not surprise Elaine. "All right," she said.

"Do you want me to get on my knees?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said. "Get on your knees." Nate bent down on one knee and proposed again. Then he said, "Write the letter."

"I will," she said.

To remarry Nate, Elaine would have to send a letter to the prison superintendent requesting a wedding. Sixteen years ago, she had asked Nate to write a similar letter so they could marry inside the Albany County jail.

"If the shoe was on the other foot, I would probably want to be in jail for you. I would probably want to go to the trailer and kill me? It's one thing to go to jail for something you did. It's another thing to go because you're in love. That's a hell of a love."

Elaine and Nate talked so much they forgot to eat, and soon the guards announced the end of visiting hours. There was still plenty of food on their table—an untouched sandwich, a half-eaten bag of popcorn. It was 2:30 p.m.—less than five hours after their reunion began.

"I want to go home with you," Nate said.

When he uttered these seven words, Elaine could feel them in every part of her body, like a pain shooting through her, fueled not by pity so much as by memory. She knew exactly how powerless and frustrated and defeated he felt. Nate was running out of reason to hope. He had exhausted all his legal appeals and had been rejected once for clemency. Elaine understood what it was like for him to watch violent criminals—rapists and murderers and child molesters—get less prison time and go home first.

The couple stood and hugged each other tightly. Nate did not ask Elaine when she would come back, and she made no promises. Perhaps the future would hold a prison wedding and trailer visit, too. If she renewed her marriage vows with Nate, Elaine worried later, she would confine herself to a future of week prison trips and too short trailer visits. She did not want to spend any more time in prison, but she also did not want to leave Nate. Whether or not they had another wedding, she knew, she could not erase him from her heart. Being with him in the visiting room—feeling his beard scratching against her cheek, his fingers stroking her hair—she was the happiest she had been since she was set free.

After a few more minutes, Nate pulled themselves apart and headed 1

See GONNERMAN page