

ABUSED WOMEN IN PRISON

by Jeannette Dean

Commotion on the lower landing drew our attention. Tina was being taken to The Block. Again. She had head-butted an officer. In spite of all the heavy medication she had kicked-off. Again.

We well-behaved women on the 'enhanced' wing enjoyed some extra privileges, such as being unlocked 18:00 to 20:30 every evening. Five of us had been trying to select one of the oft-viewed videos. Watching Tina get moved into the bare cell downstairs turned our attention. She wore only an unbelted robe. The cell had a bunk, toilet and sink. No curtains, bedding, toiletries, clothes...nothing with which she could hurt herself. Or others. And the window wouldn't open so no one could give her anything for pleasure or pain. She would be brought out daily for supervised bath and exercise. Tina was really going to miss her smokes.

As a child, Tina had been sexually abused by her father. She was repeatedly in trouble in her teens. Drugs, shoplifting, robbery. And when she thought he was interfering with her little sister, she had gone after her father with a knife.

We started talking. I was to learn that I was the only one who had not been abused. I had been in that prison for over a year, had known the five women for much of that time. But abuse isn't something that's often discussed. That's because women blame themselves.

When Tracey became pregnant at twelve, her mother wouldn't believe her own boyfriend had raped her daughter. Her mother told everyone she had seduced him and beat her. During the three years he spent in prison for the rape, her mother married him. At sixteen Tracey attacked him with a knife. He lives with a voice box. At thirty she still couldn't tolerate the touch of a man. She had been in prison a number of times for a variety of things.

Both Laine and Carol had alcoholic fathers who beat them often. They watched their mothers be beaten and deny it. Both had thought it normal, that everyone had life like that at home.

Carol moved on from one abusive partner to another. Drug dealing became her ticket to independence. Laine wet the bed until she was sixteen when her father was around. She had attempted suicide several times.

Dana was beaten by her father. The only place she could go was to her uncle's. He sexually abused her. Her mother, who also beat her, knew what was going on but ignored it. She has a long scar along her breast where her father was going to cut it off because she walked home from school with a boy. A very intelligent woman, she has three well-adjusted children. Though she's been unable to tell even her husband about the traumas, he accepted that she could only tolerate sex for impregnation.

Dana was the only one getting counseling though they all felt they'd needed help. She did feel however that her once-a-week sessions left her so upset that, had she been weaker, she would have been suicidal when locked alone in her cell afterwards.

There were physical scars, but the internal damage was by far worse. All carried huge guilt. The abusive adults had laid heavy 'trips' on them. The 'Did I ask for it?' syndrome is much harder to shed than one would imagine. It was obviously difficult to talk in a group but was a step in coming to terms with the nightmare they had lived through.

The horror of it is that these are not rare stories. I would estimate that three-quarters of the women 'inside' had been abused as children. I've read a variety of estimates, but how can anyone really know? Of we six, five had been abused and only two were 'on the records'. Tracey was given counseling only in her teens. Tina had analysis but no real help. She reckons she's become quite schizophrenic. The sister she wanted to help moves further away, separated by more than bars.

I've changed their names, of course. Such problems can't be publicly aired by any but the victims. After two years 'inside' I'm convinced that most of the women are victims in need of professional help, not incarceration. If they've offended society sufficiently to deserve a custodial sentence it's in the public's interest to allocate the funds to research and treat the problems. It's not the prisons that have failed these women, it's the system.