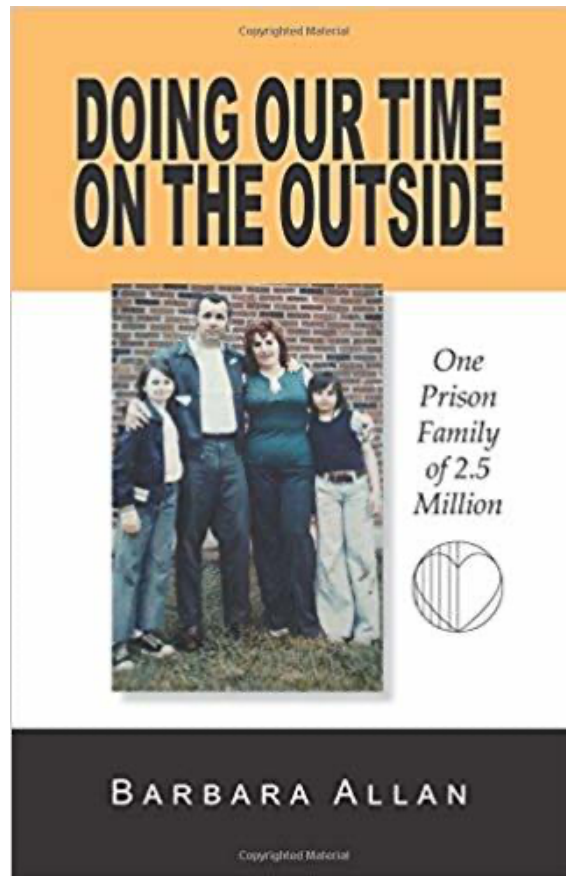


First Chapter of "Doing Our Time on the Outside"

by Barbara Allan



<https://www.amazon.com/Doing-Our-Time-Outside-Million/dp/1981711783>

This book was written with Herstory in workshops at Riverhead Correctional Facility and Touro Law Center, alongside women prisoners and children of the incarcerated.

Herstory
WRITERS NETWORK

Chapter 1: Not Me (1968)

by Barbara Allan

I took out the double stroller and put Tina in the back and Brenda in the front. It was forty minutes after leaving the Nassau County Jail, forty-five minutes after my visit with their father, my husband, Gene.

I hoped the guard would allow him to look out onto Carman Avenue and get a glimpse of his girls. This was our once-a-week ritual since Gene had been arrested a year earlier. We knew that he would soon be transferred to an upstate prison, where our routine would have to change.

How strange what eventually seems familiar. Going to the county jail twice a week was now pro forma. I knew the route; it was twenty minutes from the home we had shared and where the girls and I still lived.

I knew the guards, and they knew and trusted me. They might have even liked me. I had gotten used to seeing Gene behind a Plexiglas window and speaking through a phone, discussing intimate details with someone to my left, someone to my right, and the knowledge that someone else might be listening to those calls. It wasn't okay, but it was accepted.

Tina and Brenda had not had any contact with their father for more than year, not since a week before he was charged with murder.

No one under the age of sixteen could visit at the Nassau County Jail. The girls were two-and-a-half and three-and-a-half. They could not speak to him or hear his voice; phone calls home were not permitted. They could not read his letters. The words were squiggly designs on a legal pad that meant nothing to them. It was up to me to keep him alive in their minds. But did I want to? Should I?

As we left the jail to head home, I felt exhausted. On that day it was just my girls and me. Marjorie was usually with me. Dear Marjorie, a coworker, was barely an acquaintance. After hearing about the terrible event, she packed a suitcase and told me that she would be staying with me for a while.

"You will need help with the girls and here I am," she said.

And there she was indeed. I leaned on her both physically and emotionally. Sometimes my knees shook, and I didn't think I could make it from the parking lot to the street.

These outings with Marjorie occurred after my visits with Gene, visits that were draining, frustrating, and just plain sad. There was a routine. I would walk into the processing room, where Walter greeted the visitors. Of all the guards and correction officers I would run into over the years, Walter was the least intimidating and the kindest. How grateful I am that my first experience at a jail had Walter as the visiting room "receptionist." I was so frightened the first time I walked into that room that I went through the initial processing like a robot. As I recall, Walter looked at my

driver's license, told me to leave my belongings, including all jewelry, in an assigned locker. I think they allowed me to wear my wedding band. I don't remember if they wanted me or if they had a metal detector, as they do now. Much of those days are still a blur. I am more aware of the feelings than I am of the actual events.

I do remember that one of the officers called up to the tier and told them that the inmate, Herman Gene Allan, had a visitor, and then I was finally allowed to go through the first set of gates. When those gates clanged shut behind me, I jumped and felt my heart beating so hard I thought it was going to explode. My body was shaking, and I could barely catch my breath. After the first gates closed I was left—for what must have been seconds, though it seemed much longer—trapped inside a cage. Finally, they opened the second set of gates, and I could see into a large room with stools facing a wall, Plexiglas, and a telephone receiver. I sat on the assigned small stool, waiting for Gene to come in through the inmates' door. After waiting what seemed an eternity, Gene appeared. He was strip-searched before and after each time we met, the humiliating price he would pay to be allowed a visit.

He took his seat on the opposite side of the Plexiglas. We each picked up a phone receiver and tried to have a natural conversation, aware that every word we said was possibly being listened to or recorded. The scattered bits of conversations from others were background noises as we

tried to speak. I had so many questions. There was so much that I did not understand. Also, there were practical concerns. I was left with a house we had purchased only six months before. There were unpaid and unanticipated bills, insurance papers to deal with, leaks and creaks in the house. I was overwhelmed. I didn't believe that I could survive all this on my own.