Chapter 7

Lexington High Security Unit

I HAD ALWAYS loved old cemeteries, especially in the crisp, blustery New England fall. I especially enjoyed the quiet. But my love for such things was ended that October day in 1987 when I descended the flight of those narrow steel stairs into the basement of the High Security Unit of the federal prison in Lexington. The space was cold and small, airless and frightening. Alex and I were going to our own burial with that downward walk, only we were still alive. I would never find a cemetery compelling again.

I looked around and was overcome by the sheer whiteness of the space. It was a bright, gleaming, artificial white, the kind of white that with any lengthy exposure could almost sear your eyeballs. It was the kind of white that can make you go mad. Lexington was over fifty years old. It had been built in the 1930s as an insane asylum, and then it became a federal drug treatment center and later a women's prison. Billie Holiday had detoxed in this facility.

The basement, however, was new. They had gutted everything and constructed it all over again. It was lifeless. The only sounds were the rattling and clanking of our own chains and the barely audible buzz of the rotating surveillance cameras mounted on every

wall and at every crevice. At the entrance to the tier were eight metal doors on each side. They, too, were white except for their steel handles. All the cells were locked. It was colder in the hall than outside. The air-conditioning was on full blast and there was no natural light to provide warmth anywhere. The space resembled the refrigerator in a morgue. Nothing living had yet left an imprint.

After being herded by several officers through the set of steel doors leading ever deeper underground, we were put in an airless room containing only a standing scale in one corner. A sign over the scale read MEDICAL ROOM. The men accompanying us stepped outside and several women COs filed in. They did not look at us or speak. Neither Alex nor I tried to tell what had happened that morning in Tucson. They unchained us, strip-searched us, and left us naked. As one of them went off to find uniforms, another examined our bloody underwear and remained stone-faced. Still, no one spoke. Once we suited up in large blue jumpsuits, several men returned to escort us to yet another small room where we found our "property" sitting in opened boxes. It had arrived before we had, and had been searched and secured. The COs had inventoried all of it: photos, earrings, underwear, a favorite pen, our legal papers and books.

Mr. Ogden, the unit manager who would oversee us, secure us, and implement our psychological program, was waiting. He was a big, rambling man in his early forties, with lank dark hair that fell across his receding hairline. An American flag was pinned to his lapel. He spoke in drawn-out, excessively enunciated words as if he were speaking to someone hearing impaired.

"Well-ll, girls-s-s-s, welcome to your new home." We looked at him. "We've spent a lot of money on this place, just for you. I hope you can ap-pre-cia-te that.

"Now, all that property you have there"—he pointed to the

boxes—"you can't have most of it." He pulled out a photo album filled with fifty or so pictures of Alex's family. Sitting down on a metal folding chair, crossing his legs, he started flipping through the pages. "Nice kid. Whose is it?" he asked as we stood there watching him. "Mrs. Torres, you can have five of these. Pick the top five."

"You have got to be kidding," Alex said.

"Nope. We'll send the rest home at our expense," he said.

"We're allowed a photo album," I said. "You sell them in the commissary."

"Not here, not in this unit. We have our own rules. Pick five; that's it."

And so it went with everything: no shoes, no underwear, no jewelry, no religious medallions, nothing personal. We really argued about the book limit. The rule was five, like the pictures. Except, we realized, he was making up the rules as he went along. When we asked to see a copy of the regulations, we were told that Washington, D.C., was still working on them. It was clear that he was playing with us.

Finally Alex said, "Take it all, and send it all out. I don't want any of it."

Mr. Ogden demurred, stating that he wanted us to choose in front of him the one or two items of most importance to us. Right then, in our first hour after the morning in Tucson and the entrance to Lexington, it became clear to me that this was an initial attempt to make us dependent on the prison. More important, it was the opening salvo (albeit small) in what would become a war between two distinct sides, one of which had overwhelming power and force while the other—our side, my side—had only beliefs and a view of the world to hang on to. Alex and I would have to divest ourselves of all material ties to our world, to our past lives. We had

to begin to acclimate and internalize the idea that less is more, that everything important in our lives, the things that bound us, would go on only in our heads and hearts, with nothing tangible to stir the memory. We decided in that very first hour to hang our sanity on our identity. We would not comply with our jailer's command to choose. He seemed disappointed.

We were then handcuffed and walked through the unit, back to the cells. At the last electronic gate we were surrounded by a group of officers and officials. In the silence and whiteness even they were slightly dumbstruck. Alex and I looked at each other. We knew we were entering a tomb. I whispered out of the side of my mouth, "Nazis." She nodded and whispered back, "A white sepulcher."

As I looked down the hallway, my mind filled up with images of other places that were centers of human suffering: death rows in Huntsville, Angola, and Comstock; white cells and dead wings[1] in Germany where captured enemies of the state experience the severest effects of isolation; the torture center on Robben Island in South Africa and La Libertad in Uruguay. As these images rose and fell, my ideas and goals—my whole life—passed before me, I began to disassociate from myself.

But freeze the frame, pull the camera back: there are only two calm, small, battered women standing there, waiting. The prison camera swiveled in a 360-degree turn and a bark sounded over the intercom: "R-two gate, R-two gate, we don't see you."

A CO standing next to me said, "Move! Get in line with the camera—you can see where it is."

He shoved me and I pulled away, inadvertently stepping into direct view. "Fine," said the disembodied voice. There was a loud electronic click, but instead of the gate swinging open, the fire alarms went off. All the men jumped. Alex and I looked at each other and started laughing.

Eventually, the alarms died down and we got through the gate. The door swung shut and Mr. Ogden stood on the outside, staring at me through the small glass windows in the full metal front door. He smiled, gave me a one-handed wave, and disappeared from view.

The first three months, Alex and I were the only two prisoners at the HSU. Every day was filled with confrontations between us and the COs over every human need: getting hot water for a cup of instant coffee, taking a shower, going outside, getting medical attention, getting a book. We were allowed to come out of our cells and talk with each other but stayed locked on the tier, not allowed beyond the gates. There was a camera at each end of the tier and three gates between the end of the tier and a hall that led to the rest of the unit. Our cells had windows we could see out of only by standing on tiptoe on the bed; the view was of shrubs at ground level in the main inner courtyard of the prison. We really were in the basement, and the side we were on received no natural light. In each cell there was a nineteen-inch TV mounted on the wall. There were no books. We were allowed no physical activity inside, no communication with anyone other than the Bureau of Prisons, and no educational or other programs. But there was that omnipresent TV. That TV came to justify and answer all charges of abuse and deprivation.

We were told by Mr. Ogden that we could submit a list of fifteen people, and only those who were approved by him would be able to correspond with us. Those same people were the ones we could telephone during our one ten-minute phone call a week, and if they submitted to fingerprinting and strip searches they could visit. He went on further to explain that the same conditions would apply to our lawyers. Alex would always ask "by whose authority" was this being said or done to us. His answer was always

"ours." Our reaction was to tell our families, friends, and supporters not to visit and we refused to submit a list.

We felt that the BOP was not only burying us alive under layer upon layer of lies and doublespeak, but also trying to construct extreme and unnecessary conditions designed to intimidate everyone connected to us. We felt that if we participated in their effort to define our lawyers as security threats, this would be tantamount to accepting the government's view of us as "terrorists." Alex especially did not want to play into their attempts to criminalize the Puerto Rican independence movement. At that time, fingerprinting lawyers was unprecedented, and clearly designed to have a chilling effect.

Every day got harder and harder. I had been incarcerated for more than two years and Alex more than three. While each prison had been difficult, the HSU brought new heights of control, harassment, denial of basic human rights, attacks on our gender, and terrible cruelty.

One day we could go outside to our tiny dog run for recreation ("rec"), and the next day it "violated policy." One day we could take rec together, and the next we had to go separately. One day they would bring us hot food, and in the following days the food would be ice cold. But always there were verbal harangues.

When Chaplain Bits came one day to "counsel" us, he wouldn't open the cell doors. He stood outside, staring through the window at me as if I had two heads. He was a short, red-faced, balding man with stains on his collar. His thin mouth was pursed in a sanctimonious way bred by years of misusing the power of the cloth. I remember answering his stare with "What's the matter? Never seen a Jewish woman prisoner before?"

He finally spoke. "I have never met a woman with such a long sentence. You know, you are going to die here."

When I said that I wanted to see a rabbi, he said no. Then he moved down the tier to the next cell. Alex's husband was a minister in the United Church of Christ, and minister to one of the largest Methodist congregations in the Chicago neighborhood of West Town. Alex is a devout and dedicated Christian. She can quote from the Bible chapter and verse like no one else I know. I stood at my door trying, unsuccessfully, to hear their conversation. Later Alex told me that all she wanted from him was permission to have and wear a cross. To which he replied, "Not when you live by the sword, you die by it. You hardly need a cross." An argument about peace and rebellion ensued. His utter lack of compassion was evidenced when I heard him mutter "that bitch" as he quickly walked down the tier past my cell.

So it went, until one day Mr. Ogden took us into the day room and sat us down. "There is a way out," he said with a deadly seriousness, nothing jovial about him at that moment.

We sat silently.

"You can be transferred out of here if you renounce your associations, affiliations, and your . . . uh, err, uh . . . views. You can have the privilege of living out your sentence in general population."

"On whose authority?" We both asked in unison.

This time he said, "Take my word for it."

He can't be saying this, I thought. *I have the right to my beliefs, to free association. I'm an American.* Then I had to smile, even laugh at myself. The idea of this country and its glorious democracy still held sway in my thinking. I still cried whenever I heard Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., even though I was an "enemy of the state." Then I realized that if we could somehow convince him to put what he had just said in writing, we could expose the HSU for what it was—the first official prison for women political prisoners in

America. We knew where we were, and we knew that the BOP was concealing its real mission behind exaggerated distortions of our "dangerousness." Its officials were trying to justify the dehumanizing conditions they had put us in by slapping a label on us (and on top of that claming the conditions were not inhuman because we had TVs). I was very happy that this had just happened. I felt that he had just given us the tool to fight back with. We told Mr. Ogden that we knew what they wanted us to do, and that he could forget it. He smiled, as though to say that time was in his favor. He let us walk unchained back to our cells.

Later that same day, we were escorted through two gates and placed behind the locked gate at the entrance to the shower stalls. A voice said, "Jim, move—you're blocking the view." My eyes searched the walls until they found the camera down the hall, facing the shower entrance. It was trained on the two-foot-wide space between the shower stalls and the wall, the space where Alex and I stood to take our clothes off before stepping into the shower.

"You're all sick," I shouted. "Watching us in the shower is perverted. What do you think we are going to do in the shower?" I shouted furiously.

After that, we refused our shower privileges until we figured out that we could wear layers of clothes to the shower and hang the outer layer on the bars to block their view.

The only visitor I saw was the rabbi: under BOP contract. I assumed that the officials allowed him in to see me because they felt that violating prisoners' religious rights was one of the few places that they were still vulnerable to a legal challenge in the federal courts. He was the head rabbi of the Lubavitch community in Cincinnati and he drove once a week, every week, year in and year out, to meet with the twenty or so Jewish women in the general population of the more than twelve hundred women at Lexington.

Rabbi Josephson had been ministering to Jewish male felons there for more than twelve years, before the prison had been turned into a place for women, in 1984.

That first time we met, he was accompanied into the basement by Chaplain Bits and two lieutenants. Rabbi Josephson was in his forties, with black curly hair and black clothes. He was a burly man who fit my exact preconceived notion of an Orthodox rabbi. Even though he was sweating and seemed nervous, his eyes were direct and searing. I have no idea how he perceived that first meeting, but I committed the first infraction right then by trying to shake his hand while introducing myself. Of course he wouldn't take it, and at first I thought it was because he was afraid of me. Then I realized that he wouldn't shake a woman's hand. My heart sank, and I thought, *I've been struggling all my life against this type of backwardness.*

But he smiled and said, "Let's sit."

We were standing in the day room with cameras whirring, COs watching us through a window, and the chaplain and the lieutenants hovering nearby. I said, "I want privacy. How can we talk with all these people?"

"Let's sit and talk. Forget about them."

I began to object, but he moved to the corner of the room, pulled up two chairs, put his back to the men, and pointed for me to sit. I sat. Very softly he whispered, "I've never seen anything like this, in all my years, never. They didn't want me to see you. I've been trying for weeks to get down here."

I said, "Thank you for coming, and making it happen."

"Ms. Rosenberg, Susan, what did you do? Why all this hatred?"

I whispered back, "Whatever they told you, it is a lie. I am not a terrorist, nor am I dangerous."

And then his face split into an enormous grin. "That I can see."

Chaplain Bits and the others were talking among themselves and laughing loudly. Again, I wanted to tell them to leave us alone. The rabbi said, “I have only five minutes now, but I promise I will be back. What do you want from me? How can I help?”

I was taken up short. I had been arguing with the COs for a long time about my right to see a rabbi, but now that he was here I didn’t really have an answer. I realized that I had gotten caught up in “my rights” without having a deeper reason. I felt embarrassed at that. “They’re torturing us down here. You can see we’re buried alive. And every day it gets worse and worse,” I said. “Regardless of my conviction, I think I should be able to celebrate my religion, and practice it. I want to go to the Jewish Passover with the other Jews here. I want to explain to you why I am here.”

The rabbi said, “In all my years here I have never been escorted anywhere, even to segregation. Upstairs we study, we pray, and we practice together. I oversee the holidays and the kosher kitchen; I teach and give solace and ensure that the religious rights of Jews here are upheld.”

“I don’t want to study. I am not a Jew who believes in that way, but I am proud to be a Jew and these people won’t ever stop me from being one. The COs read their Bibles out loud over the intercom going directly to our cells. Hellfire and damnation are the order of the day, every day. It’s driving us crazy, Jews and non-Jews alike,” I continued.

He sagged at my words. He didn’t say anything, but I could see that he believed me.

“It’s Stammheim[2] down here. You know what that is?” I asked. He shook his head, so I kept talking, rushing to get as much out as possible, with my eye on the clock. “It’s the prison in Germany designed to hold political prisoners and modeled after the Third Reich’s penology. Attorney General Edward Meese, the current

German government, and others have agreed to build these prisons in all the Western countries."

His eyes said, *You go too far, this can't be right.*

I knew I was losing him. "No, really, it's modern and new. It's small-group isolation in what are called 'dead wings,' with the goal of identity destruction."

Before I could get another verifiable detail out of my mouth, Chaplain Bits broke in. "That's it. We are leaving, now!"

The rabbi stood up rapidly, and I could see that he was more than ready to go. "Susan, where are you from?"

"New York, New York City," I answered.

The rabbi's face lightened ever so slightly. "Me, too; Brooklyn." As the COs hustled him off, he called back over his shoulder, "I'll bring a study book next time." Then the elevator doors closed and he was gone, and all the men with him.

As soon as Rabbi Josephson left, several COs came in. They were bruising for a fight and their hostility was palpable. "Rosenberg, get in that room. We're doing a strip search," the head CO, Ms. Marshall, barked.

I had known ever since my arrival that I was part of an experiment in dehumanization and that no one involved in it could risk any empathy. Their role was to transform me into the "other." In spite of this knowledge, when I got back to my cell after the strip search I couldn't help falling into a deep sadness. I thought, *Rabbi Josephson thought I was crazy, a paranoid, crazy woman.* I berated myself for hours for not being calmer, or more thoughtful, for not making a plan prior to talking with him, and for not putting on my neater and cleaner uniform. And then I wished he had been a Reform rabbi and not Orthodox, which made the terrain of our Jewishness so wide. Yet despite my self-doubt, and my fear that I was losing my grip on reality, I knew I felt better simply from the

familiarity of his New York self. It was only later that I realized that his very orthodoxy was what drove his commitment to me and the other prisoners; it was his mitzvah (good deed) which had enabled him to listen and understand me. His open-heartedness and his willingness even within the confines of the extreme security measures to risk engaging with me challenged my own rigidity. This challenge made me see beyond my own stereotypes.

After the rabbi's visit, something extraordinary happened. My food tray changed. The rabbi had put me on a kosher diet. He had told the food line that it was a religious necessity for me (although we hadn't discussed it). The food was infinitely superior to the standard fare, and it came in huge servings. It was prepared separately from the rest of the food, for a small segment of the population and in small batches with better ingredients. It was cooked in a pork-free kitchen by both Jewish and Muslim prisoners. This was the result of several lawsuits that had been won over the previous decades that upheld a prisoner's right of religion.

At a time when the regular food trays for everyone in the HSU were filled with heaps of processed American cheese, tiny bits of lettuce, and ketchup (then deemed a vegetable by President Reagan), three times a day for weeks on end, Rabbi Josephson's small act of solidarity saved all of us from nearly starving. I shared my better fare with everyone in the basement. Later, I learned that one of the Muslim cooks was a woman named Apple. She was a good friend of Laura's, my dear friend and political associate of over a decade. Laura Whitehorn, who had been arrested in Baltimore, MD in 1985 and been held in preventive detention ever since, detained in the women's prison in Alderson, West Virginia, awaiting trial on politically motivated charges of weapons possession and bombing. Apple was responsible for the enormity of the portions. There was an informal grapevine and network in prisons all over the federal

prison system. The grapevine was used by both prisoners and officials. For prisoners, it was a way to get information about people and where they were and how they were, and for officials it was a way to hold people in line with what they wanted prisoners to know. Apple had been in prison with Laura in West Virginia, and had heard all about me from Laura, so when she got to Lexington she did what she could to help me. She succeeded beyond measure.

I was never allowed to see the other Jewish prisoners. They wanted me to participate in their services, and I wanted to, as well, but my basement status overrode religious rights. In April 1987, after I had been in Lexington six months, I asked the rabbi to bring a message to the Passover service. I wrote:

> I wish to share my spirit and love with you tonight. I wish that I could be there with you, but for obvious reasons, not of my choosing, I cannot. Tonight as you celebrate the Passover and remember the struggle for liberation and freedom, I will also. Coming to prison has taught me much about anti-Semitism in America, and as a result I have come to better terms with my own history and the most positive and progressive aspects of our traditions. I long for peace between Israel and Palestine. I will drink from Elijah's cup. In solidarity, Susan.

It was in that basement where I began a study of Jewish history and thinking. I had consciously rejected the Holocaust as a frame of reference when I had been in previous prisons as too extreme and not accurately comparable. I did not want to overstate the conditions that I was experiencing, yet I found reading about it crucial to my mental framework and my very survival. I felt encompassed at Lexington by an ideologically driven evil, beyond anything I

had yet experienced, and I desperately needed a frame of reference to understand it. I read modern European history, German history, Antonio Gramsci, the great Italian Communist and writer who wrote *Prison Notebooks,* and one history of the Jewish people after another. I followed the path of repression over the twentieth century through a circuitous route that led from the "disappeared" in Argentina, to the work of Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi, to the poet-philosophers like Elie Wiesel and Tadeusz Borowski, a Polish poet and writer also imprisoned in Auschwitz, who had survived the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. Primo Levi more than other survivors showed me a way to give meaning to my suffering and to try and give voice to the others who were suffering alongside me. I found a purpose in the anguish, if not the philosophical and moral explanation I was looking for. I would bear witness. I would render from the isolation and repression and torture a record. Finding this purpose, grasping this idea and making it my task changed my life, my thinking, and ultimately my view of the world. And on a more internal level (before I learned that all my poet heroes—Levi, Borowski, Paul Celan, and others—had committed suicide), I found a new way to survive by reading and writing and thinking with purpose.

I had help in this realization, help and support. It was during this time that Mary, my lawyer, had really become my lifeline to the outside, to a semblance of sanity, to a human and loving connection, which all took place through weekly twenty-minute phone calls. I think Mary understood the limits of what she could do to help me and at the same time understood that her work in relation to me and her communication with me was the most vital in staving off madness from the conditions. Mary knew that the tenuous thread connecting me to the outside—maintaining my strength and sense of humor—was critical to surviving. We

developed an ongoing private joke that served to underscore the battle we were in. I would tell her about one horrendous violation after another and she would say, "Write it down, *for the record*." I half believed that keeping a record was a futile effort, and she half believed it would be of use in fighting for justice, but that sentence became a signal between us, a way to reference acts of violence too difficult to discuss.

"Write it down," Mary said on a phone call that I was allowed to make after several weeks of concerted sleep deprivation. Hysteria was rising in me as I recounted the past nights of forced waking, and I could hear the tears in Mary's voice acknowledging my pain. I knew she believed me, yet neither of us could express our outrage directly (over a surveilled phone). "Write it down, for the record" was Mary's way of helping me see the means I had in front of me. She never grew inured to my suffering. She felt it as her own.

Primo Levi wrote that the best historians of the concentration camps were political prisoners. Because the camps were fundamentally a political phenomenon, he said, it was the ex-combatants and anti-fascist fighters who had the background to interpret the events. They realized that recording their testimony was an act of resistance. I started to write.

Alex and I had successfully resisted our jailers' attempts to fingerprint all our visitors. We felt that underneath the policy of fingerprinting them was an assumption of guilt by association. We believed that if the authorities succeeded in implementing it at the HSU, they would then make it national policy. It would be a step toward criminalizing people as a preventive measure. For the first several months we simply refused visits. Eventually, with the legal community on the outside publicizing the HSU's violations of constitutional due process, the prison authorities backed down.

Mary's first visit brought me great joy and relief. She had come to see me and Alex, and to see the unit for herself. With her dark blond hair, her vibrancy, and her warmth, she looked so normal that the sadness mixed with fury that emanated from her was astounding and beautiful.

Alex and I had been there for three months. By then we had already begun to look sick. We were thin, pale, drawn, unkempt (haircuts had been out of the question). Our beige uniforms were the same color as the walls in the visiting booth. We were beginning to blend into the concrete.

"What is it like?" Mary wanted to know. "Tell me. How is it different from the other places?"

To see a friend, to see someone who was not an agent of the government, brought out the emotions I had been suppressing. "It's got eleven surveillance cameras. There are no visible cameras in our cells, but the surveillance extends into the area of the showers. There is a little room on the tier with the cells called the multi-purpose room, and we are allowed in there. We eat in that room. It is about the size of a cell, six by eight. To get off our tier, we have to go through two electronic gates. We are always accompanied by an officer. It is controlled movement." Without pausing for breath I kept on. "We have no contact with anyone outside of the staff, yet we are subject to strip searches anytime. We are constantly patted down by men, and our cells are shaken down every day. It is utter craziness! No one comes here, and no one could get us any contraband unless they were an alien with magic powers."

Mary was writing as I was talking. She didn't look up, but she kept asking questions. "Go on," she said. She knew I needed to tell her the details. Somehow she knew that I had been humiliated beyond imagination and that maybe recounting it all would help me.

I wanted her to believe me, to know that I wasn't exaggerating. "We see no natural light, we breathe no natural air, and we eat no food that hasn't been microwaved. We see nothing but white color. Our social contact is with a television. Our mail and our reading material are either withheld completely or censored. We don't get outdoor recreation, we can't take showers except when the COs say, and they always tell us to shower when men are on duty."

I finished this description by telling her about my cell. The thing I wanted Mary to understand was that we were being subjected to an orchestrated psychological program. I told her that Alex and I had cells on the "dark side" of the tier, the internal side of the building. I described our high-up windows and limited view of the courtyard. On the "light side," the windows, at normal height, looked out onto a fenced-in field that was part of the prison grounds. We had been told by Mr. Ogden that the light side was the privileged side. When we heard that, we laughed.

I don't know what Mary made of my account. I know that I felt embarrassed at my appearance and at what a mess I was, and how I sounded, even to myself. I remembered her from the days when I had been free and we'd both been political activists. Now I felt awful and sad that she was seeing me like this. But there was no way to talk about that, to even get close to those kinds of feelings, because they took energy and energy was diminishing with each passing day.

Mary brought up the subject of my parents visiting me. I didn't want them to come; I didn't want them to see the prison, or me in it. They had visited me regularly in New York and in Tucson, and the connection between us was growing, not diminishing. But I felt that it would be too hard here. Mary told me that it wasn't my decision to make, that they were my parents and they needed to see

what was happening. We argued, but in the end I knew I couldn't stop the visit. She then told me about other friends on the outside and people I had come to know on the inside. Just watching her sitting across the table from me was a calming experience.

Then she began to talk about the beginning of the campaign to get Alex and me out of Lexington. There were groups and organizations on the outside that would not let us be disappeared. The Puerto Rican independence movement and, more specifically, the National Committee to Free the Puerto Rican Prisoners of War were not going to let Alejandrina Torres languish in a basement. She was considered to be one of fourteen Puerto Rican prisoners of war in U.S. prisons having been convicted of seditious conspiracy. The Movimiento de Liberación Nacional (MLN) and other independence organizations had launched a campaign to free them, defend them, and link their continuing resistance in prison to an anti-colonial campaign against the U.S. government. They were planning to engage the progressive churches and get them to examine and monitor the conditions at the HSU.

The United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church, and other religious denominations had also heard of our plight and were just beginning their support work. There were people from the left who were organizing and supporting us. A small number of women lawyers and students from Lexington and Louisville had begun a group to protest the conditions at the HSU and had organized several small demonstrations outside the prison. The committee to shut down the Lexington High Security Unit had been formed, and people were working to defend us.

I knew that we were not forgotten, but the isolation was profound and on some levels effective. So while Mary's words made me happy, their meaning didn't really penetrate. Then Mary said,

"You know, Susan, you have to explain what this place and the conditions here represent because there are other people living in conditions that are just as bad. Laura is in Alderson in the hole; Tim and Alan [Berkman] are at Marion, and you know Marion is in a twenty-three-hour lockdown."

"Mary, a hole is a hole for sure. It may vary in size and temperature, but its purpose is always to further punish and control the prisoner's behavior and access. No doubt, most county jails are filthy, unsanitary, with horrible food, and no physical activity. I know because I have been in some while in transit from one prison to another. I've been in Oklahoma, in Dallas, in Birmingham. But this place has to be viewed in its political context. We have to look at how it developed, what counter-insurgency techniques are being used, how the Bureau of Prisons created new classifications for women, the psychological conditions, and, most important, who is in it! There is room here for sixteen, but there are only two of us." I was on a roll now. "Prisoners, especially political or militant people, spend years in holes. Martin Sostre, Geronimo Pratt—both spent seven years in the hole. And there are many others. But here, the authorities are saying, 'Because you are political, you will spend *your entire sentence* under these conditions unless you renounce your beliefs.' And it is *written* in the coming regulations about this place, and that is what makes it different. Supposedly, we in America don't have political prisons, and we don't use torture to coerce people to renounce their beliefs." I sat back exhausted. I could see from Mary's eyes that she thought that getting that kind of analysis out into the public arena would be difficult. She wanted to see the regulations in writing herself. But I could also see that she agreed with me. Mary would organize as much as she could, to the best of her ability.

After every visit the COs retaliated against us for breaking their control over every aspect of our lives. The strip searches increased.

By the spring of 1987, there were five of us. When Silvia Baraldini was brought to Lexington in the late winter of 1987, Alex and I had been there for four months. Silvia had been quietly living in general population in California for four years. She had a record of clear conduct and despite her forty-year sentence had managed to create a life inside. She had been the prison librarian; she had visits from her sister Marina and her mother, both of whom lived in Italy. She was reconnecting with her past—friends from her days with the Students for a Democratic Society in Madison, Wisconsin; friends from her defense work for the Black Panthers; friends from her years in the women's movement. Silvia had created a network of support and survival. But when she refused to talk to the FBI agents who came to question her about other people, the very next day she was transferred to the HSU at Lexington. Silvia was the only one of us who knew what life in general population was like. Because she knew that general population in prison was less restrictive, she had something to compare our conditions to. Having that knowledge made doing time harder for her.

I knew Silvia well. We had worked in political organizations together for more than a decade. We had been in a leadership body of the May 19 Communist organization, an outgrowth of the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee, which had been a support organization for the Weather Underground. We had both been indicted in the New York federal conspiracy case. Silvia had been convicted of conspiracy, the same conspiracy that included the prison break of Assata Shakur and several bank robberies. We had been partners, but I hadn't seen her for five years, and we hadn't been on the best

terms when we had seen each other last. But Silvia and I made an agreement on the very first day to build our unity in that basement, and we wouldn't let them divide us.

I had my parents. My mother and father may at one time have been left-leaning liberal, secular Jews from the Upper West Side, but they had moved far beyond that stereotype to become dedicated advocates for my human rights and freedom. I saw this at Lexington and watching their transformation was fantastic. They embraced Silvia, Alex, Tim, Marilyn, Mutulu Shakur, and many other political prisoners. They refused to be intimidated by all the forces that the government unleashed against them directly and through its attacks on me. When in 1982, the FBI threatened my mother with prison if she didn't testify in front of a grand jury, she immediately got a lawyer and said, "Try it." When the FBI went to my father's dental office and warned him that they could hurt his practice, he threw them out.

At the start, my folks had been furious with me. They said that I had brought my punishment on myself, that I was wrong to choose political violence over pacifism. But as they involved themselves in my defense, they came to believe that those of us involved in the "struggle" were moral and that our political principles were motivated out of concern, not out of hatred. I don't know exactly how their views began to change, but I know that after they visited Lexington they were with me with a fierce and undying love.

My desire not to have them visit, which had sparked my argument with Mary, was partly due to my own arrogance: I was afraid they wouldn't be able to deal with it. Up until then, in all our visits we had been able to maintain at least the pretense of well-being, a semblance of normalcy. Alex's husband, the Reverend Jose Torres, had visited at Tucson the same time as my parents, and we had all spent time together. Somehow we laughed, and ate, and carried on

as families do, even if we also wept. Those were good visits. But the HSU was a living tomb, and I knew it would break my parents' hearts.

I spent hours preparing for the visit. I thought about all the best things to say, how to be positive, what we could talk about that would not be too painful. Mainly I tried to be calm and appear okay. I wanted to protect them and to manage our emotions. Knowing that the visiting room was filmed and taped, I felt it was important to keep control. I was even then losing the ability to distinguish between the repression that was directed against me in the HSU experiment and the wall of ice I was building between me and feeling anything at all. I was clamping down on my own self and my own feelings in order to repress myself rather than succumb to the BOP's repressive tactics.

I waited in the visiting room for my folks to be processed. When the CO escorted them in, they bounded toward me, enveloping me in an embrace of love and support that was like a laser cutting through ice. We hugged as tightly as possible until the CO watching us rapped on the glass window and said, "No more contact. You can only have contact at the beginning." I turned to say something, and my father put his hand on my arm to tell me not to waste time on them.

We sat cramped in this ridiculously tiny room, happy for the tight quarters that allowed our knees to touch and our energy to envelop us. My father's eyes filled with tears. "This is unbelievable," he whispered.

"Let's not cry," I said, barely managing to keep my voice from cracking.

"No, we won't cry, we'll just be quiet for a while," my mother replied.

After we all pulled ourselves together, we began to talk as if our

lives depended on it. All my careful thinking, all my preparations, evaporated and I told them as much as I could about my life in that basement. They told me about all the people they were meeting and learning about who were sympathetic. The words poured out of our mouths.

When we stopped to catch our breath, I asked about my father's side of the family. None of my uncles, aunts, or cousins shared my parents' liberal sympathies. My father had taken a different path. He had been the only son of his Polish-Latvian immigrant family to go to college and then on to dental school. He had veered from their rigid and narrow immigrant community during World War II when he had met Communists and radicals in his Army unit in the Pacific. His vision and politics was a mix of humanism and socialism (although he voted Democrat) for the rest of his life.

My father married my mother when they were in their thirties, and it took a long time before his family accepted her. To them, she was an exotic, bohemian beauty whose experience surpassed their understanding. The daughter of a Hungarian immigrant and factory worker, my mother had come from Detroit, Michigan, by way of Hollywood, California, where she had become a film editor and movie producer, a radical and an organizer. Most problematic, though, was that she was divorced.

Over time, however, everyone mended the rifts and coexisted in the way that dysfunctional families do—that is, until 1965, when they all argued over the Vietnam War. I remember visiting at an uncle's house when the subject of the war came up and the screaming started. It didn't take long for the differences and then the old prejudices to spill out.

My uncle told my father, "It's my country, right or wrong. You love it or leave it, you unpatriotic bastard."

My father turned so red with anger that I thought he was going

to have a heart attack. Then my aunt said something about my mother that I couldn't quite hear. My father grabbed me and herded us out of the house. We never went back.

Forgiveness had come twenty years later, but now, when I asked how each one was by name—Uncle Jack, Aunt Ruth, and on and on—I felt the hesitation and a discordant energy.

"Did someone die?" I quietly asked. "Who is it?" When you are in prison, you always think about people dying; it is what time and hostile surroundings do to your mind. But this time I knew. "Is it Neil?"

Now there was total silence in the room. Neil was my favorite cousin. Only a few years older than I, he was a painter, an artist, a fellow tortured soul who had for much of his life been in and out of mental institutions with schizophrenia. Neil's father had died when he was little, and my father had filled in. They loved each other. My parents had tried to help Neil throughout his childhood and had encouraged him to study at the Art Students League. They visited him in the various hospitals and homes that he bounced in and out of. They introduced him to other artists; they tried to sell his work.

Neil lived with us for short periods when I was growing up and I loved him. Everyone said that we looked alike, more like brother and sister than cousins. I was an only child and Neil was a middle child, the problem child. He was odd, and I felt odd, and we had an uncanny affinity. I hadn't seen Neil in over five years.

"Please tell me," I asked.

"Susie," my mother said, "Neil is dead."

"He died of a heroin overdose," my father added.

"Heroin?" I asked, surprised. I hadn't known he was a junkie. I wasn't shocked to hear he was dead, just terribly sad.

And then my father said, "He died the night you got arrested."

"What? What do you mean? That's over three years ago. How could no one tell me?" Now I was shocked.

"We didn't want to tell you when it first happened, when we first saw you in New York. We thought it would be too much, and then it never seemed to be the right time, and you didn't ask about him. Then it got harder and harder to figure out how to tell you," my mother said, searching me inside with her eyes.

I began to cry. I don't know if it was about Neil, about their not telling me, or about the idea that I could be so isolated from my past life that a favorite person could be gone for three years without my knowing it. "This is cosmic, this is too much. The same day—me and Neil on the same day," I said.

I looked at my parents sitting across from me and I realized that we were alike in many ways. The three of us were always trying to parcel out our pain in limited quantities, to protect ourselves. I knew they had withheld the news about Neil to protect me, just as I had tried to plan our visit in order to protect them. Yet I was angry, too. I felt they should have told me about Neil a lot sooner. That they didn't made me feel excluded from our family. Sitting there, I couldn't sort out my emotions. I had thought my parents would be devastated at seeing Lexington, but death had intervened and made the HSU recede.

Our visit was terminated arbitrarily by the guard, lest we forget for one second where we were. I was left with only a promise of more talk the next day.

I went back to my cell exhausted. That day more than any other, I hoped there were no cameras in the cell. I lay there weeping and raging. I chain-smoked until my fingers were brown. I paced back and forth, and could barely keep from banging, pounding, and punching the cement walls. I felt a terrible, heavy sadness as I thought of the consequences that we were all living through. All

these unintended consequences were from actions of my own doing. I raged against myself and against my captors until I finally fell asleep.

I woke with a start. Both Silvia and Alex were yelling through the food slots in their doors. "Susan, Susan, turn on your TV!" I hopped up and flipped the switch. There on the local NBC news were my parents, surrounded by the women from the local Lexington support group, made up of a few women human rights activists. They were holding a press conference right outside the front gates of the prison. My mother had fire in her eyes as she defied the small jam of reporters to contradict her. "This place is a prison within a prison. No one deserves this. I don't agree with what my daughter did, but she's a human being, not an animal." She was furious. Then my father read from a written statement.

About this same time I filed a Rule 35 motion. This is a "safety valve" in federal sentencing that allows prisoners to appeal to the sentencing judge for a reduction of sentence. There are many grounds upon which to file such a motion. It is predicated on the idea of compassion in sentencing, or if not outright compassion, then a consideration of extenuating circumstances. Those can include family hardship, acceptance of responsibility, new evidence, or a willingness to comply with requests from the prosecution. Such compliance could mean cooperating in an investigation or testifying in another trial. After initial sentencing and the completion of all appeals, the clock starts running and the convicted person has 365 days to file a Rule 35 motion. Everyone files it. For the most part, it is an exercise in futility, but once in a while a judge will grant the motion and the lucky convict will get a time cut or will be released with time served.

I had no appeals left. During sentencing, I had scoffed at my sen-

tence. I had thought that the system itself wouldn't last fifty-eight years. In giving me the maximum time allowable under the law, Judge Lacey had said that he was not sentencing me for anything other than what I was convicted of in his courtroom, which was a possessory offense. He had said that he was not in any way swayed by any other charges that I was facing, and that they played no role in his sentence. He was referring to the charges stemming from the federal conspiracy case that included the attempt to free Assata Shakur from prison and the Brink's robbery. Although it was certainly not his intention, his making that assertion would help me years later. Then he was ensuring that there would be no constitutional challenge brought on the basis of bias or prejudice on his part. He didn't know that the Southern District of New York would drop the Brink's charges and refuse to take me to trial.

Now it was 1987 and time to file the Rule 35. What made it even a consideration was that Judge Lacey had retired from the bench. I could bring the motion in front of an entirely different set of judicial eyes. Three years after passions had cooled and the prosecuting attorney had also retired and moved on, none of the original players would be there except for me. Mary wanted to file. I did, too. But I was in Lexington and it was taking every ounce of strength for me to manage there. Mary told me that because such a motion had to be premised on remorse or "changed circumstances" (such as a major witness recanting in a trial), there was no point in filing unless I had something new to say. I had no new circumstances, so I was left with remorse.

Remorse is a complicated thing. In this case, it didn't mean simply taking responsibility in front of the court—saying, "Yes, judge, I did it"—but also apologizing for endangering people and a lot more. I *was* sorry that I had endangered people by moving hundreds of pounds of explosives without numerous precautions in

place. I had spent a lot of time thinking about it, and thinking how fortunate it was that no one had been injured. But, still, I wasn't thinking that it was wrong to have done it at all, wrong to have resorted to the use of arms; not yet, anyway. At the time, remorse to me meant apologizing for my politics, and *that* I wasn't prepared to do. I felt that I had taken responsibility for my actions. I felt that by saying that my government was responsible for war crimes and genocide, and that in all good conscience I could do nothing less than oppose it, was equivalent to saying I had "done it." But the meaning of "it" was the issue. To me, "it" stood for revolutionary opposition to my government up to and including the right to use arms. To the court, "it" stood for a violent criminal intention to murder innocent people.

The new judge in New Jersey was Marion Trump-Barry. All I knew about her was that she was Donald Trump's sister, and hardly a liberal. When Mary, my parents, my supporters, and several hundred friends went to court to argue the motion, all Judge Barry wanted to know was what I had been intending to do with the explosives—what I had been planning to blow up—and who else was involved. Mary answered that, to her knowledge, there had been no specific plans and that the court knew that everyone else involved had been arrested. She further argued the disproportion and disparity of the sentence, citing cases in which KKK members and anti-abortion clinic bombers had been sentenced to five years or less for similar charges.

It took the judge less than an hour to deny the motion. A year of work, of emotional investment and energy on the part of so many, was gone in a matter of minutes. Mary and everyone else who had worked on the appeal were crushed at the ease with which the decision was rendered and knew that there were very few mechanisms left to use to change the sentence. My mother wept in the

courtroom as the judge announced the decision. I heard about it over the phone in a monitored legal call. The guard who was listening laughed and rushed away to inform the other cops on duty in the unit. They had a small party in their office.

My heart hardened, even though my rational mind had expected the outcome. There was no end in sight, and I remembered a quote from Franz Kafka: "There is hope, but not for us." Still, the magic elixir of hope and possibility had taken hold even in that stone-cold concrete box. From that process, I had learned that fighting for freedom is a constant and that in the fighting itself comes the energy and will to carry on. I learned that freedom has many meanings and levels to it, and that I could be chained to ideas as tightly as to any cell. And I learned that hope is a fantastic dream in its most shining beauty and its profound dangerousness. Hope can pump blood through frozen veins. Hope can stir the near dead.

But all of life cannot be lived on hope. So amid the turmoil of this defeat, I again turned to think about what I did and didn't believe. I had to ask the question: "Why am I here?" "What is my worldview?" For the first time since I had been arrested, I began to reassess my own views and most deeply held beliefs. Then, over a period of many months, all long in the making, a series of earth-shattering events took place, one after another. Though external, they penetrated even our prison within a prison. The Berlin Wall fell and the Velvet Revolution brought new governments to Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary. At the same time, the winds of *glasnost* carried in *perestroika* and shook the foundations of the Soviet Union. The revolutionaries in Central America, in El Salvador and Guatemala, laid down their arms and began peace negotiations. Peace processes began in Northern Ireland, in South Africa, and even in the Middle East.

I watched it all on CNN World News, a weekly two-hour show that used international news service feeds and that was my primary connection to the outside world. I was watching people assert themselves in many different ways to fill their long-unmet needs. I was witnessing the victory of the United States in the fifty-year-long cold war. I was seeing revolutionaries who were my contemporaries recognize the stalemate that their national liberation processes had led them to. I saw them choose to stop the death of innocent people by entering negotiations and renouncing political violence.

I sat in that basement heartbroken because I could see even from that isolated basement, the idea of an alternative world based on socialism and the collective was slipping away, and at the same time I was in awe. Socialism and revolution had failed, but millions of people were demanding—and gaining—greater freedoms, economic and political justice, and above all peace.

I was not awed by the power of my own government's role in all of this, though I understood it to be crucial. As an avid student of history and current affairs, I knew all about which corporations controlled which policies and which financiers were profiting from war, and the military industrial complex. Rather, I was awed by the very simple idea that people do make history and that the old saying was still true—that the power of the people is the force of life. And I remembered what it had felt like in the late 1960s and 1970s to be a part of that power. It was a far cry from the isolation of the Lexington High Security Unit. Now I began in earnest to rethink not only my beliefs, but also my whole ideology, the very framework that had driven me to act all through my adult life.