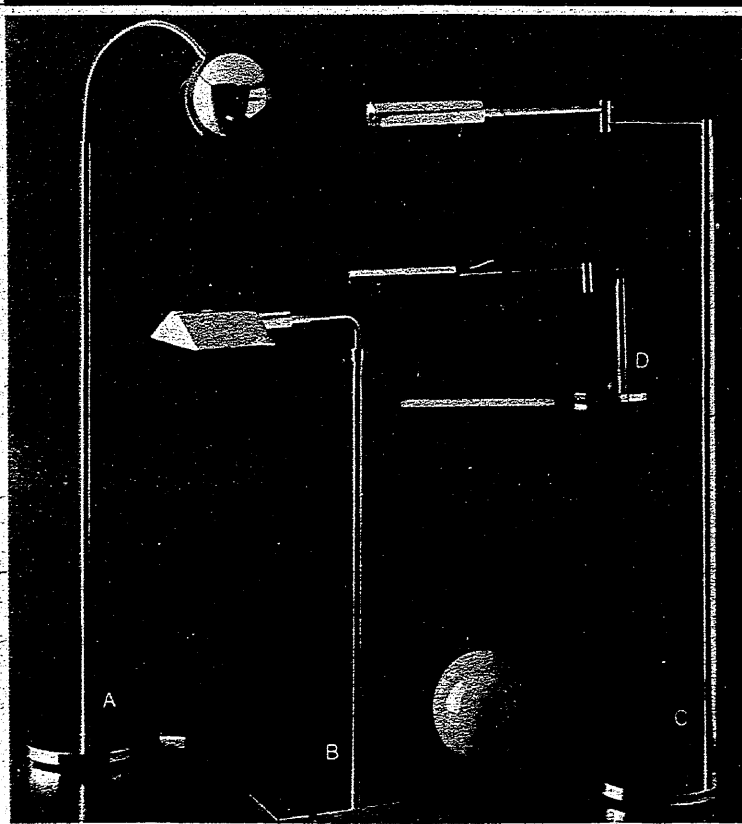


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California Living

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The Cover

It's time for the Grand National, which winds up the rodeo year. For a look at the traditional season opener, the 1980 Oakdale Rodeo, see Page 28. Photography by Conrad Sims.

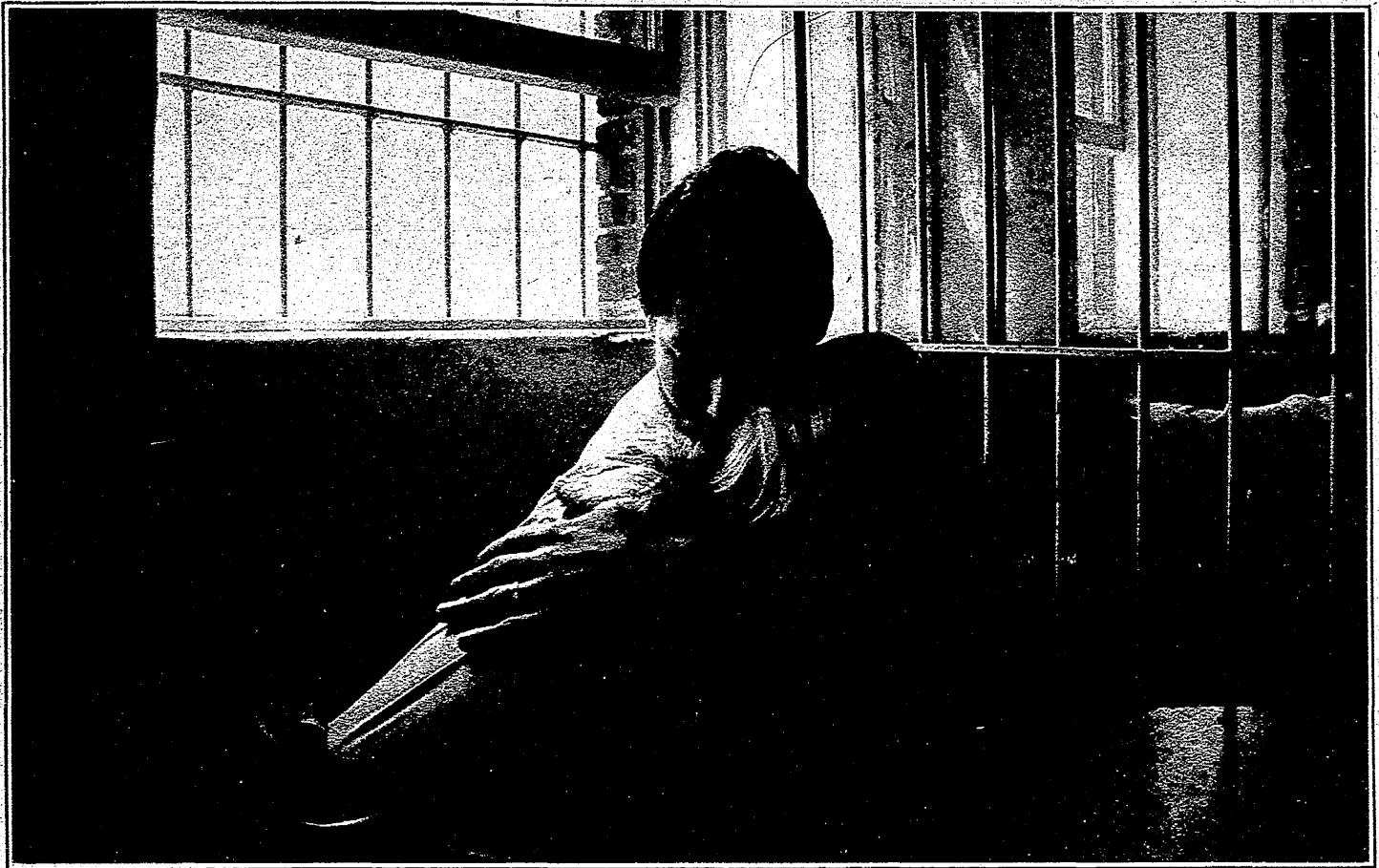
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Diversions: By Rich Stim. Some tv junkies revel in commercials, and punctuate their "gems" by turning the volume way up.
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Places: Text and photography by David O. Weber. John Bowman founded the Oakdale rodeo in 1948, and it has since become the largest and richest two-day rodeo in North America.
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Notes

■ There are two new contributors this week: Grant Finlayson (*Collections*) is a student in East Asian Studies at Stanford University. He has previously been published in *City Sports* magazine. Madeline Camisa (*Neighborhoods*) is a high school teacher and freelance writer.

— H.I.S.



Photography: Fran Ortiz

Romance Blooms At San Quentin

■ Julie sat alone on the straight-backed wooden bench trying to stop herself from wondering what he would look like.

A guard walked toward her with a huge man in tow. His long dark hair was matted and half of his body appeared to be covered with tattoos.

Oh no.

Covering her disappointment, she smiled. "Are you Russell?" The big man grinned and said, "No, would you like me to be?"

Relieved, she sighed, leaned back and reminded herself that she was there as a friend. What he looked like didn't matter. It just didn't matter.

Growing restless, she forced herself to avoid looking at the prisoners as they came out of the cell block to greet visitors.

Instead, she watched the others waiting. The wives, the sweethearts, the fathers and uncles and, now and then, a weeping mother.

"Are you Julie?"

She turned and found herself looking into

*"Julie had never seen
Russell before but she felt she had
known him all of her life."*

two huge, clear blue eyes. He was a beautiful man with flowing sun-bleached hair, a blond beard and matching eyebrows.

She had never seen him before but she felt she had known him all of her life.

By anybody's definition, San Quentin inmates are not "good catch." And yet, day

By Nikki Meredith

after day women come to the prison and fall in love. Lawyers, teachers, hookers, housewives. Some come looking for love, some come for other reasons and find themselves entangled. Patiently they wait in long lines while their bodies are searched, their possessions examined. Some rearrange their whole lives in order to be available for these visits. Visits where for hours they sit with their men — drug addicts, murderers, armed robbers — with stars in their eyes and love in their hearts.

Julie and Russell are a rather unlikely couple. (These are not their real names; all the names in this story have been changed.) While she was getting a graduate degree in education, painting in Paris, marrying and divorcing an attorney and raising two sons in Mill Valley, he was bouncing in and out of various penal institutions, finally winding up in San Quentin for armed robbery and kidnapping the occupant of a car he was stealing.

continued

Behavior *continued*

Last summer, a friend of Julie's who worked at San Quentin mentioned that she was collecting books for an inmate who was studying Eastern religions and having difficulty getting literature on the subject. Julie, who has studied Eastern religions for years, sent him several books. "I was touched that someone in prison was so eager to learn."

They started writing letters — letters in which they exchanged ideas about Buddhism, meditation, "the path." At one point, Julie wrote that she wanted to meet him. Russell hadn't had a visit in five years and he was apprehensive.

"I was scared because of my tremendous need for feminine contact. I was suspicious of my motives for wanting to see her."

He was also suspicious of her motives and wondered if he was some kind of curiosity. "I thought maybe she was just feeling sorry for a guy who had been in prison for ten years."

He wrote her a letter describing his background and said he would like to meet her if she was still interested in visiting after reading it. She wrote him that she was.

When Julie talks about that first visit, her warm, hazel eyes glow and her tanned face creases with pleasure.

"I had never known what it was like to speak the same language as a man. The other men I had known had been so afraid of emotional commitment. Russell was so open, so tender, so willing to give.

"I felt a connection on every level. There were no social roles, no fancy cars, no stylish clothes. I just brought myself and all he had in the world was himself."

"Things happen faster in there because you relate from who you are faster. None of the social games are there."

Julie and Russell were married four months later.

Sharon sits in an organically decorated Marin County restaurant and writes letters. Every spare minute she writes letters to her husband Sam, a forty-six-year-old black man who is in San Quentin for a gambling-connected murder.

"I am not a masochist. I want everyone to know, I am not a masochist," she says. "And I am not a convict groupie. I am a strong, independent woman with an interesting, exciting life who happens to be in love with a man in prison."

She is an attractive, olive-skinned woman in her forties. She has a sensuous mouth and dark shining eyes which convey a little suspicion, a little humor.

She is an artist and a teacher and has written and illustrated two books. She has raised five children.

Sharon met Sam when she enrolled her adolescent son in the Squires Program — a three-week counseling session designed for



"Susan feels Dave's confinement forced him to change and has given them a chance to develop a solid relationship."

delinquency-prone boys and led by San Quentin inmates.

At first their relationship focused on the problems she was having with her son. They exchanged a couple of letters and she brought her son to see him a few times. Then she came alone.

"After Sam kissed me for the first time, the depth of my feelings scared me," she says.

"I realized I was hooked on this man and he was going to be in prison for three more years. I didn't want to spend all that time going to the visiting room. I cried and cried."

"Sam handled all of my fears and my tears beautifully. 'If it hurts this much, don't come back,' he said, very gently. But I did come back. I love him."

But Sam is a murderer.

"He is in prison for murder, but he is not a murderer. That was ten years ago. I wouldn't want anyone to judge me by what I was ten years ago. He has taken great pains to understand himself, his anger and what made him do what he did.

"There are things Sam and I talk about that I have never been able to talk about with anyone else. He is so people-wise. His level of truth, the lack of games, really drew me to him."

Sharon believes prison forces some men to turn around inward.

"It's the experience of being empty... emptied out so they can't run away from their own need unless they remain tight, alone and deprived.

"There is no softness in there. Everything

is hard, the sounds are hard. Men are forced to get in touch with a deeper self.

"Most of us give about ten percent in a relationship. In there, there is not time to hold back. Every woman dreams of having a man who is totally there, totally responsive. That's how Sam is with me."

She smiles, then laughs. "Swept Away. That movie said it all."

Susan is a graduate student at Berkeley in her late twenties. She is a big, bright, articulate woman with a little girl manner. She is involved with prison reform and has recently been hired by the government to evaluate federal prisons.

Susan had an off-and-on relationship with Dave for a couple of years before he went to San Quentin. When she visited him there for the first time, he had been transformed from a "skinny little heroin addict" to a muscular, healthy looking man. ("Driving iron," or weight lifting, is a popular prison pastime.)

She feels his confinement forced him to change and has given them a chance to develop a solid relationship.

"We write each other almost every day. In these letters we continue conversations we have when we visit. We have a second level of communication most people don't have. We have collected pools of understanding.

"There is so much love between us. Sometimes I miss him so much I ache, but at the same time, I don't have to fix his breakfast or be home all day — I can have my own life."

continued

Making a commitment to Dave was difficult for her because she had to give up a long held fantasy of marrying a Nobel Prize winner or a famous lawyer.

"I finally figured out that I don't have to marry someone for status because I'm going to be successful in my own right — I'm going to win Nobel prizes myself. I can marry Dave just because I love him."

Most women who are involved with prisoners deny that they intentionally sought romance inside the penitentiary. But prisoners do seem to have a unique appeal.

Emily, another Mill Valley woman who met and married a man while he was in San Quentin, was drawn, in part, by a sense of adventure. "I was a straight, Marin County divorcee with three kids. He was a man who had been part of a Steve McQueen-like dope smuggling operation, involving guns and airplanes flying in and out of Mexico.

"When I met him, I was so tired of passive men. It seemed like that's all I was meeting on the outside. Ben was certainly not passive."

She was also attracted by his tremendous need for her.

"It was a chance to be an enchantress, totally. I was bringing all this wonderful stuff to this depressed and isolated man. I guess it was a combination of vanity and maternal instinct."

Sharon Giarraturo, a student at San Francisco State College who works with the Prison Law Project, has observed many prison romances and feels she has some understanding of what draws women to prisoners. "A prisoner is tuned into his woman 100 percent. He gives all he's got — his hopes, his thoughts, his feelings. People on the outside aren't going to find that. The woman is his whole world inside and sometimes his only tie to the outside."

Although it is still early in the day, the huge visiting room is crowded and noisy. Toddlers with their diapers drooping clutch baby bottles and waddle aimlessly while their older siblings play the vending machines like they were Las Vegas slots. Families rush to claim square wooden tables which will serve as little islands for that day's visit. Couples who have staked claims earlier kiss and hug passionately — experts at engineering amazing degrees of intimacy, discreetly.

The visiting room at San Quentin is the prisoner's main link to the outside world. It is a place to visit old friends but it is also a place to find new ones.

A muscular, good looking black man wearing a silky shirt and designer jeans (all inmates must wear denim pants, but any kind of blue jean qualifies) spends a lot of time "hot dogging" (lusting after) the women in the



"Most women who are involved with prisoners deny they intentionally sought romance. But prisoners do seem to have a unique appeal."

visiting room. He's at San Quentin for first degree murder. He's been in prison a long time and he has a long time to go.

His girlfriend hasn't visited him in over a month but he's not concerned. He says he's sure he'll find another one. "If I accepted all the offers from women who come here, I'd have more girlfriends than I'd know what to do with." He flashes a big seductive smile, "You know I'm the prettiest thing around."

(As attractive as women find him, however, they are not all willing to accept the three conditions he says he requires of his ladies: "She's got to be willing to bring me money when I need it, she has to meet my mental needs and she's got to agree to have sex in the visiting room . . . And I'm not going to get married.")

For those who lack the opportunity or the aggressiveness to hustle women in the visiting room, matchmaking is another possibility. But Joe, a tall, affable black man, says he's leary of fix-ups. "If a guy talks about setting me up with his sister, I tell him not to bring her unless he's got a picture. I don't want any surprises when I come into the visiting room. That's like sticking your hand in a basket and pulling out an unknown."

And there are some men who are apprehensive about getting involved with women at all.

"When you're alone, the days just blend into weeks and the weeks into months," says Jim, a man who has spent a long time in prison. "Once you care about someone on the outside, you start doing hard time."

Relationships make men more vulnerable in other ways. "When you're involved, you live for those visits. It's just one more thing the joint has over you because the visits can always be taken away," Jim says bitterly.

He also says a man's relationship provides a weapon to other convicts. "When you have a girlfriend or a wife, there are some guys who work on you every weekend: 'You think your woman is really staying home and knitting while you're in here? It's Saturday night — you know what folks out there do on Saturday night?'"

"Who needs that?"

And not all the men who are looking for women are looking for love. Some convicts refer to their women as "mules." Under the guise of romance, they seek women who will smuggle contraband dope. "Fatties" — women who convicts say come to prison because they can't find men on the outside — are so hungry for relationships that they are particularly vulnerable to being used this way.

They make the long walk from the first gate to the second metal detector in a group. One is wearing a long, lacy white gown with a high collar, a sprig of baby's breath tucked behind her ear. She hobbles along in ankle-strap high heels. A shapely black woman wears a strapless green disco dress. A third woman wears an extremely low-cut, gauzy white dress; her short, bleached-blond hair is combed neatly back. A heart tattoo is visible above her right breast.

continued

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Behavior continued

*"From ten to twenty-five weddings
are performed each month at San Quentin."*

It's wedding day at San Quentin. Twenty brides are expected today, but one of the guards remarks that usually at least one loses her nerve and doesn't show up.

Some come alone, some bring families and some bring friends.

An older black man who has been at San Quentin since 1952 slowly walks out of the cell block with two friends who will be his witnesses. He eagerly scans the visiting room with his eyes. His best man sees the bride first. "She made it, Harry, you don't have to kill yourself," he laughs. "I guess she took a big dose of courage this morning." The bride, a sober, pretty black woman, dressed in a linen suit, holds onto her young son with one hand and embraces her groom with the other.

It takes two Marin County clerks several hours to marry sixteen couples this day (four brides don't show up). One clerk is quite businesslike and rushes through. The other one takes a little time, gently pushing the bride and groom together to let them know they are married and it's time to kiss.

The young girl in the long white dress slips her heels off right before the ceremony. Even at that, she is slightly taller than her groom, a short Chicano man with a broad smile and a big mustache.

The blonde woman with the low-cut dress is surrounded by family. Her groom has a long dark beard and tattoos peaking out of the edges of his shirt. He looks like he just climbed off a motorcycle.

Prison marriages are relatively new in the California Prison System. In 1975, the Legislature enacted a law which, along with other civil rights, granted prisoners the right to marry.

The combination of the new law plus the rule that only married couples can have overnight conjugal visits, has made marriage a high priority item in prisons. Now, anywhere from ten to twenty-five weddings are performed on the first Tuesday of every month at San Quentin.

A plump young blonde with heavy black mascara on her eyes and a peace symbol embroidered on the crotch of her trousers waits in the visiting room for her fiance. She was fixed up with him two days ago and they will be

getting married as soon as possible.

At San Quentin, one-night stands must be sanctioned by the state.

California prisons may be the last places on earth where couples routinely wait until their honeymoons to consummate their relationships.

When Julie and Russell were married, they were lucky enough to have their honeymoon the day after their wedding. (Sometimes couples must wait several months.)

Even to Julie's eternally optimistic eyes, it was not the Fairmont. The conjugal visiting flat, which is in a wood frame house on the prison grounds, was grimy. (It has since been improved.) Cockroaches skittered across the floor, mice hid behind cabinets, springs popped up through the holes in the mattress. But it was home.

As she unpacked, she discovered that she had forgotten to bring a top sheet. She asked the trustee who helps maintain the house for a sheet. He brought her a single bed sheet.

"Don't you have any doubles?"

"Lady," he said sarcastically, "this isn't Howard Johnson's, it's San Quentin. All we got is singles."

Despite the single sheet and the cockroaches, Julie says it was a wonderful honeymoon. All night Russell held her in his arms, stroking her hair as she dozed. She would wake and smile and he would hug her and say, again and again, "I love you so much."

It had been ten years since Russell had slept with a woman.

No one keeps track, but it is said that most prison relationships don't last. "Most of those marriages are ill-fated," says Barbara Bloom, the former director of the House, a respite facility for prisoners' families. "They begin on a fantasy level and they are very intense, but day to day living is different. I don't question the love, I question the artificial circumstances. She has seen many women hurt by these relationships.

Emily and her husband stayed together about two years after he was released. "The man you marry in prison is not the man you are married to

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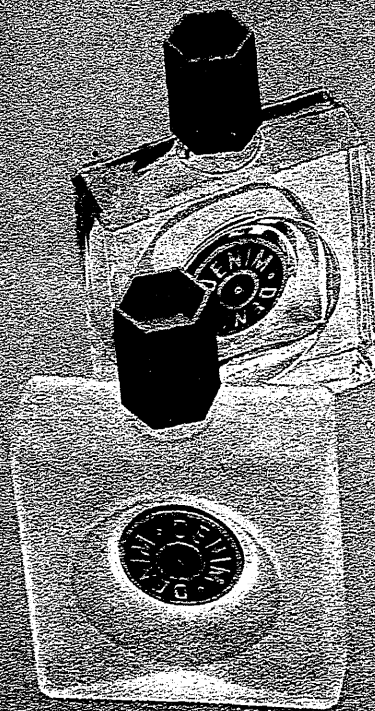
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Behavior continued

"Linda and James are making it on the outside and feel they are building on the relationship they started in prison."

when he gets out.

"When Ben was in prison, he seemed to want to open up and explore. But when he got out, and was faced with the reality of making it on the outside, he shut that door.

"A lot of his insecurities and dependency needs just didn't manifest themselves in prison because everything is taken care of in there.

"Also, the difference in our educations and our backgrounds was not an issue while he was in prison. In fact, I was always impressed by his lack of defensiveness. But when he got out, he really got weird about it."

The pressure between them built and he became violent. In prison, she was the only one who made him happy. On the outside, she was the only one he battered. She eventually left him.

But there are exceptions.

Linda serves James a cup of hot Tang and honey a drink he learned to love in his twelve years in prison. He is from a lower class black family and spent most of his youth in institutions. She is from an upper middle class Jewish family and attended Juilliard School of Music before going to graduate school in social work.

Linda is a Bay Area social worker and met James when she brought some children (clients) to San Quentin to visit their father. James was there serving a life sentence.

They fell in love and married while he was still in prison and for five years they worked to get him out. (When James was eighteen he was involved in an armed robbery. One of his partners shot and killed a store manager.)

When Linda talks about reading the transcript of his trial, her dark eyes fill with tears. "He was eighteen and facing the death penalty. No one, not one person from his family cared enough to come to the trial. He was all alone."

James has been out almost three years. He is a tall, boyish man with a sweet smile. He now teaches at a continuation school.

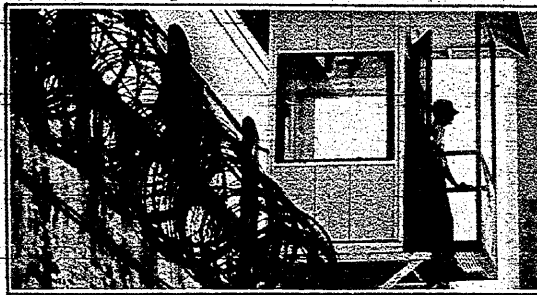
Linda and James are making it on the outside and feel they are building on the relationship they started in prison. "Most people don't realize that it is a privilege to be alone with the one you love."

James points to the piano he recently bought Linda. "She teaches me about music and antiques and things I never knew existed before." Linda smiles, "You teach me about life."

In their years together, they have seen a lot of prison romances fail. Why has theirs lasted? "We're strong people, we're disciplined people. We believe in fidelity and commitment and, most of all, truth." Linda looks at James. "If I lost him, there could never be another man, and I've known a lot of men."

Every Saturday and every Sunday, Julie packs
continued

"When Russell talks about prison, it is with wisdom. For years he has analyzed the system, the people."



Behavior

a picnic lunch, a table-cloth, maybe a bouquet of flowers, and visits Russell. He is due to be released in a few months so he is living at the Ranch, a minimum-security area of the prison.

Julie and the other visitors are driven in a little bus to the back interior of the prison grounds.

Among her bundles, Julie has packed bait for Russell and his friends to use when they fish in the Bay. Another inmate who has no visitors comes by to pick it up, thanks Julie and then quickly moves on. A friend of Julie's stops by to ask Russell if he knows an inmate whose name appeared in the personal column of the newspaper. Her friend has seen his ad for a pen pal and wants to know if he is a "games player" before she writes to him. Russell doesn't know but he'll ask around.

When Russell talks, his words are direct and so is his eye contact, but he averts his head slightly, implying a tentativeness to the communication. He seems to test the emotional waters before he plunges. His language is an interesting mixture of prison jargon, metaphysics and down-home psychology.

When he talks about prison, it is with impressive wisdom and understanding. For years he has analyzed the system, the people, the relationships. And he spends a lot of time thinking about his marriage.

"One of the hard things in here is the forced up-downness [inequality] in our relationship. Julie is so generous. She brings me all these material things and I can give her nothing. I feel crippled."

Julie shakes her head emphatically and says, "But that doesn't matter to me."

"But listen, Babe, I'm uncomfortable with it. It makes me feel self-conscious. I'm like a little kid who keeps getting ice cream cones. I want to give something back."

When Russell talks about the outside, he seems so vulnerable, almost child-like. "What are people in Mill Valley like?" He is asking if he will be accepted. He worries about Julie's friends and wonders what they will think of him.

Julie doesn't worry. She has no doubts. "I have always dreamed of having a relationship like this. I feel like Russell is the best friend some part of me has been yearning for all my life. I know our marriage will work." □

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