

New Nonfiction from Patty Prewitt: "Missing Amy"

Missouri inmate Patty Prewitt has been in prison for almost 40 years. She is serving a life sentence for the murder of her husband, Bill, in 1984. The conviction, however, is problematic. The prosecution's case relied upon slut-shaming Prewitt and questioning her fitness as a mother based on relationships that took place five and more years before the murder, a time when the Prewitts were separated. The prosecutor did not share with the defense evidence that established a strange car was seen parked around the corner, a significant omission. A pathologist, brought on only weeks before trial was discredited in a number of trials where he served as a witness for the prosecution.

Prewitt is not eligible for parole until 2036, when she will be 86 years old. Maintaining her innocence, she declined a plea bargain that would have made her eligible for parole after just seven years. Had she taken the deal, she would have been released many years ago.

Former Missouri Department of Corrections Director George Lombardi who, during his 41 years in corrections, has never recommended anyone for clemency supports Prewitt's release.

In light of "the long sentence she has already served, the total support of her children and grandchildren, and her unprecedented contribution to the culture of the prison and to her fellow offenders," he recommends that "Missouri Gov. Parson take the just, responsible and compassionate action and grant Patty Prewitt clemency." Warden Brian Goeke identifies Prewitt as a woman best suited for release.

"Where'd you get these? Did an officer give 'em to you?"

"You think I'd do a guard for protein bars?"

He looked appropriately shocked, so I continued, "No one trades a protein bar for sex! Look around! These horny hos give it away!"

Unabashed because he actually thought he'd made a good bust, this skinny eighteen-year-old corrections officer then asked, "Then where'd ya get 'em?"

With the same degree of furious indignation, I spat out, "At the can-efing-teen! There's a list on that wall of what they sell! Why don't you check it out before you accuse this old lady of trading geriatric sex for protein bars!!!!"

As a mic-drop finale, I snatched the three bars from his hand, turned on my heel, and marched down the hall to my freshly-tossed cell to survey the damage.

At that very moment I missed my prison kid Amy with a heart-squeezing ache. We shared a cell for a decade and like an old married couple we regaled each other every evening with the events of the day—mostly tales of how stupid this prison and these people are. She would have howled at this encounter.

Because of her drug addiction, Amy passed through prisons for a couple of decades. I knew her during every incarceration and warmed to her readiness to see humor within the darkest of prison days. During her next to last confinement, she gave birth to a son. He was the one that she gave up entirely. She was finally mature enough to know she couldn't provide a child with any kind of stable life. Her two daughters weren't so lucky, and both ended up in this prison with us.

At the beginning of her seventh and final prison bid, I spied her across the chow hall at breakfast. I hadn't heard that she was back. Self-disgust radiated from her slumped shoulders and bowed blonde head, so this captain-save-a-ho ambled over to hear the sad story of why she was back. Again. As a conclusion to the convoluted tale about how she ended up with two sevens and two fives running wild, she quietly added, "Yeh, Patty, I

fucked up again. I'm under a mandatory fifty percent. Twelve years flat. I really fucked up this time." My heart broke for her and all the broken-winged sparrows who fall from freedom into prison. Breaking my reverie Amy asked, "Ya gonna eat that toast? Butter? Jelly?"

As I shoved my tray her way, an idea sprang to mind. "What wing are you on?"

"A, and it's a loud, disrespectful, trap-house zoo. Plus they put me on a top bunk above this rude, loud-snorin' bitch with boils all over her butt. Boils! She says a spider bit her, but I bet it's staph. No self-respectin' spider would put his mouth on that ass!"

"Amy, I have an empty bottom bunk in my room. If you want, I'll ask Ms. Raspberry if she'll move you over. They train service dogs now, and you'll love those pups."

Amy brightened like the sun breaking through a cloud. That's how we began our decade of cohabitation.

Because Amy owed nearly \$2000 in unpaid parole fees, she reluctantly headed straight to the dreaded clothing factory to get a job. The factory was the only place that paid a living wage, and she had no one on the outside to help her.

Within the relative safety of a four-person concrete prison cell that had been converted to jam in six, we made our home. The other four bunks were inhabited with a parade of girls just passing through. Some joined our conversations. Some didn't. Amy and I made a pact to keep the cell peaceful, and we did. During count times, I sat cross-legged facing her, while she perched on the edge of her bunk swinging her short legs. We verbally painted scenes, crimes, and memories from our free lives. We mulled over how the snarky librarian had admonished us. We worried about our kids. We conspired, aspired, perspired. No subject was off-limits. More importantly, I listened, really heard her. I didn't give her a

load of unsolicited advice. I just loved and listened. Therein lies the magic of healing.

When Amy was just a little kid, her father had her and her older sister at his place for the weekend. On the way to go fishing, he told the girls to run out to the pickup. He'd be right there. They waited until Amy couldn't stand it any longer. Disregarding her sister's protests, she raced back into the house to holler at him. When she burst in the living room poised to yell, "DADDY," she choked. His limp body lay crumpled across the rusty-orange shag carpet, a ragged pool of red blood oozed from where the top of his head had been, the smoking shotgun muzzle still stuck in his gaped mouth, hunks of brain tissue, blasted across the wall, lost their grip and splatted on the console TV.

Less than ten years later, Amy was a pregnant teenager. Her heartless mother never spoke to her again. Small wonder she self-medicated.

Amy was the same age as my daughters, so I couldn't help but mother her. I made sure she had the hygiene items she needed. I religiously placed a multivitamin on her locker every morning and encouraged her to eat her veggies, because she had Hep C. She loved softball and created, out of misfits, the best team in this prison. We didn't win every game, but she made sure everyone felt good about themselves. We laughed a lot. Even through tears.

When the goon squad busted in like rabid Nazis to tear up our cells, Amy would want to lay down and take a nap. Tornado warning? She would be overcome with drowsiness. Prison is one anxiety-producing occurrence after another, so I mercilessly teased her that she suffered from some form of stress-induced narcolepsy.

As an integral member of our prison theater troupe, Prison Performing Arts, I tricked Amy into taking a speaking role in

The Rover, a period piece with sword fighting. We were issued foam rubber swords, but during the first performance, as Amy thrust, the blade part fell to the floor. She was left holding the handle. At that moment Amy discovered she was a natural comedienne. She never looked back and was in every play we produced. A star was born.

All her life, Amy had considered herself a royal loser. A slut. A drug addict. A thief. A horrible mother. Stupid. Unlovable. A poor excuse for a woman. Ugly. A midget. (She was short, barely 4'10.) She had never glimpsed or believed in the special, talented human being that I saw in her. Acting became her saving grace, and she thrived on stage. When college courses were offered, she enrolled. Even though she doubted that she'd be able to do the work, with a bit of my tutoring, she turned out to be an excellent student. I'm a certified fitness trainer and talked her into training, too. The physical and mental work was hard, but she persevered and puffed up about an inch after passing the exams.

Our prison time marched on in its petty pace until we got the proverbial good news/bad news. The good news was that legislation had been passed that would free Amy soon; the bad news was she was not prepared. We always planned for her to work at the nursing home when she was eligible so she could save up a healthy nest egg. My daughter Jane set up a hasty go-fund-me account that raked in enough to buy her a laptop so she could continue her college. Amy left here with nothing but thrift-store clothes on her back.

It's hard starting from scratch, but she was doing so well out there in the free world. Clean and sober, working to keep spirits up in the nursing home. Then Covid hit, and life got really scary for the confined. She had the Department of Corrections on speed dial complaining about how prisoners were poorly treated. Out of the blue, Amy fell in love with a man unlike any she'd ever known, a kind and honest man who truly adored her. She was making me believe in happily ever after.

But Amy died. Suddenly. The addicts all attributed her sudden death to drugs, but I knew better and felt vindicated when the autopsy proved me right. Amy's big broken heart had failed. She suffered cardiac arrest as she was preparing to go to care for those women and men in the nursing home prison.

Real life is no fairy tale, Amy. I miss you.