

Portraits of Sadness and Survival: Women in Prison

By Kathleen Palasi

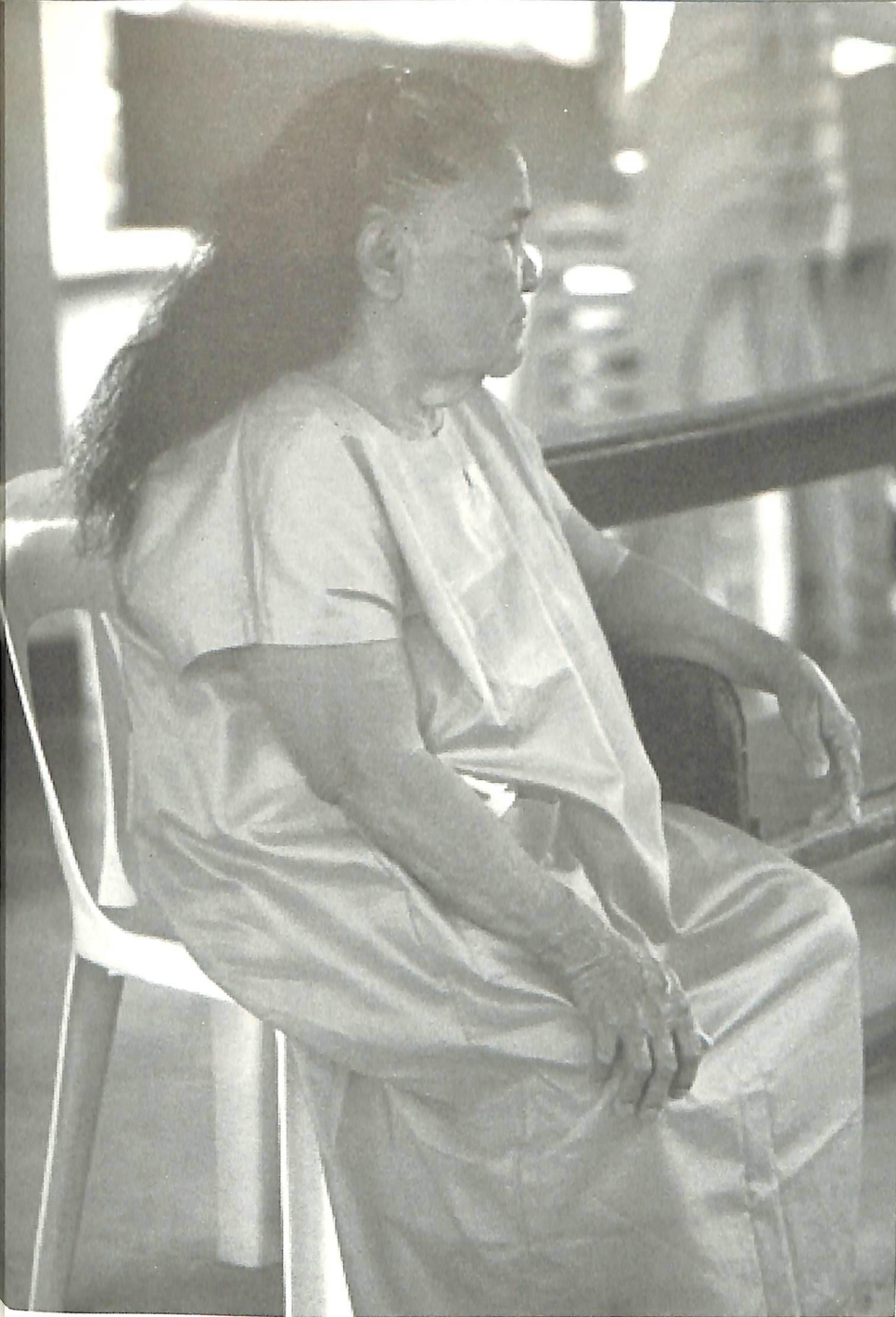
Photos were taken at the Correctional Institute for Women, Mandaluyong, Manila, Philippines, 24 July 2003

Gloria, 29 years old, is in prison because she killed her husband. Gloria started experiencing abuse from her taxi-driver husband soon after they married. She endured this for the sake of her three children. One day, however, her husband came home drunk and high from a shabu (crack cocaine) session. He forced her to have sex. When it was over, she grabbed a knife and killed him.

Gloria has been in detention for three years now. She misses her children, who now stay with her mother in Mindanao. Her eldest son writes her every month. Though she is hopeful that prison life will not be forever, she is grateful that she has passed her computer literacy course and has made friends with all of the inmates. "Kaibigan ko silang lahat." (All of them are my friends.)



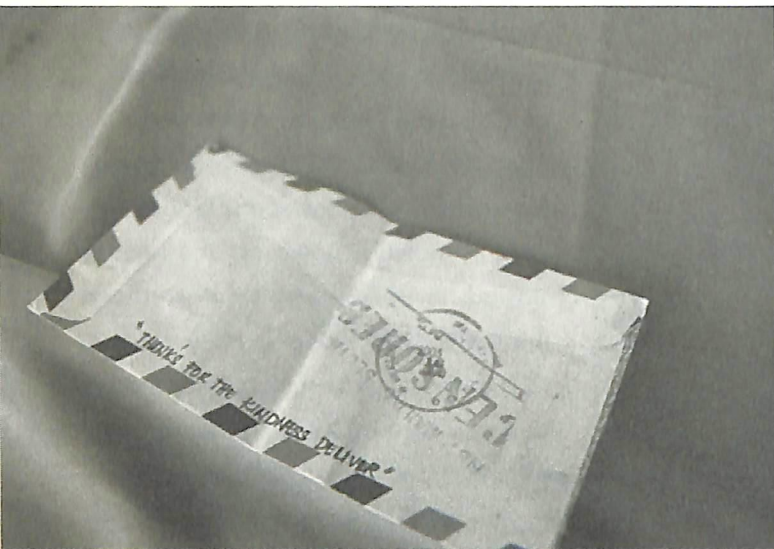
Aling Berta, that's what we will call her, is accused of kidnapping her daughter-in-law who was later found dead in a province in the north. She is 45 years old, and has been an inmate for three years now. Her co-accused, her husband and son, are both at the Muntinlupa Prison. Her accused son is also lame—he doesn't have use for both legs. She often asks, "Why are we in prison when we couldn't possibly do this crime!" When asked what she expects in the near future, she replied "I don't know much about the legal aspect of things. I have been duped by people who claimed they wanted to help us. I think I will just pray for God's mercy and wait for the kindness of other people."



Aling Precy is 73 years old and originally from Masbate in the Visayas, central Philippines. She is accused of possession of marijuana, and has been in prison for nine years. She used to be a laundrywoman living in a small hut somewhere in the chaos of Caloocan, Manila. A few years ago, she would still take in clothes for washing while inside the Correctional. Recently, however, she has slowed down considerably. According to Fanny, the lone social worker taking care of more than a thousand inmates at the Correctional, that Aling Precy still tries to take in washing because she needs the money. She gives this to her son's kids who visit her, although irregularly. "My husband died while he was in the hospital because no one took care of him. Now, I just worry about my children and my grandchildren. I just want to take care of them."

This is Aling Precy's favourite pair of slippers, a gift from visitors.





Ginny, 30 years old, is with Myka, her five-day old baby. Ginny is accused of aiding her husband in killing her adoptive parents in 1998. Her husband is at the Death Row of the Muntinlupa Prison. He writes to her occasionally. She still loves him, she says. She will have to give up Myka when the child turns a year old. She realises the Correctional can not provide for her baby's needs and she must think of relatives who will be able to take care of her baby. Ginny is on the fourth year of her ten-year sentence.







Norma, 51 years old, was a policewoman stationed in a province north of Manila. She is in prison because she killed her husband. Their seven-year union had resulted in one child.

"I married late. I was 33. He was a soldier stationed for a long time in Mindanao. Three months after we got married, he started hitting me. He would hit me with anything—wood, plastic, etc. Then he would hurt me before we have sex. I didn't say anything to my family because I was ashamed. I have ten siblings and we are very close to each other, but they didn't know how much suffering I endured until he was already dead."

Her daughter is now 17 years old. She was seven when her mother was imprisoned. They communicated recently and Norma learned that her daughter wanted to study nursing. Norma said she should just study to become a teacher, but teachers don't earn enough money, her daughter reasoned. Norma wants to get out of prison soon so that she can work and send her daughter to school.

Postscript: Norma was recently granted pardon, after ten years in detention. She is looking for employment so she can support her daughter's education.

The swing where most of the women spend their time pondering the future.



Lola Gabriela is 82 years old. Also accused of possession of marijuana, she has been in prison for 12 years. Someone asked her to help with a bag of what appeared to be clothes, but which turned out to be marijuana leaves. When they reached the town centre, someone grabbed her and brought her to prison. The man who asked for her help then disappeared. She is optimistic that she will still return to her family and her home. She walks very slowly and is well loved by the prison staff. She is one of the oldest inmates of the Correctional.

