

RATIONS

PICNIC IN THE YARD

By Jaime Joyce

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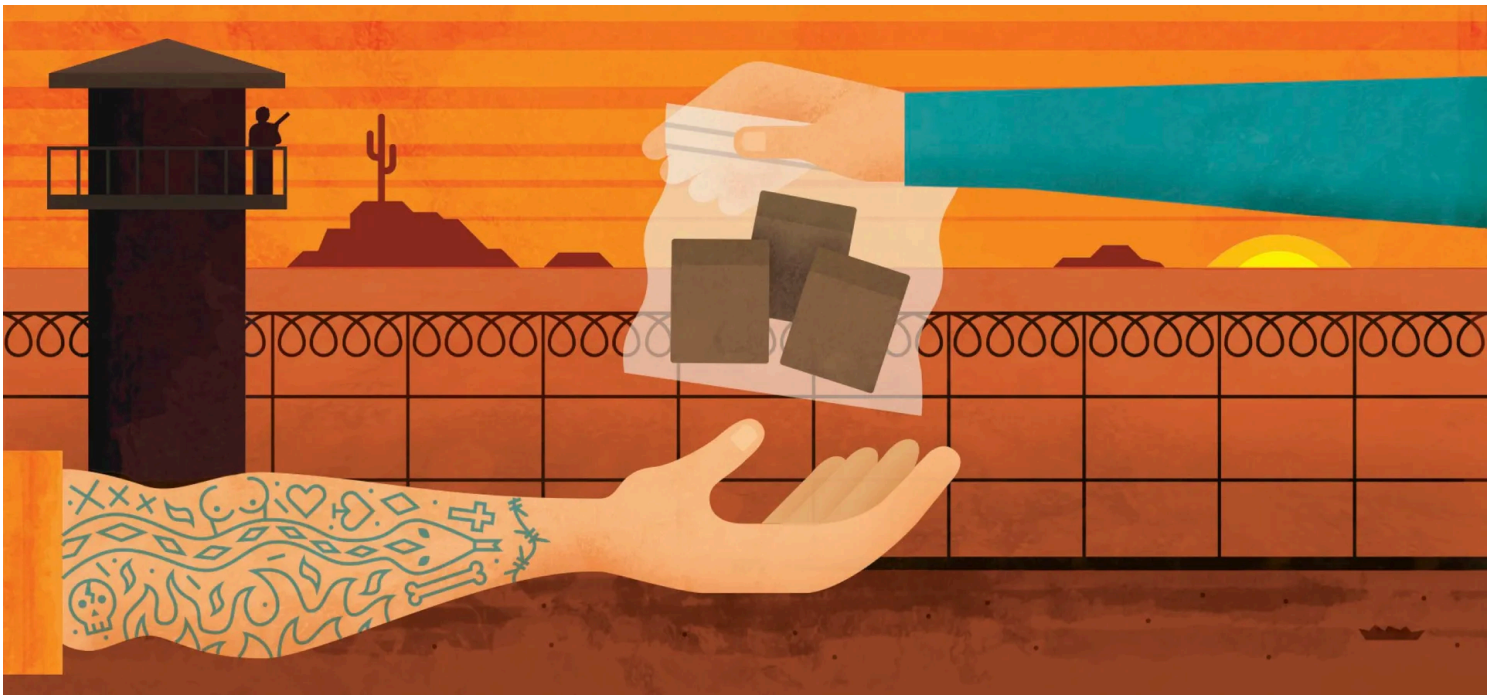


Illustration by Mikey Burton



Save this story

For years, we said that my little brother would end up either dead or in prison. In 2005, when he was twenty-three, he went to a Holiday Inn parking lot in Mesa and tried to sell ten pounds of weed to a guy who turned out to be an undercover cop. He was sentenced to six years at an Arizona Department of Corrections prison complex near Phoenix. We were relieved, in a way, because

prison was so much better than dead. My mom and sister went to see him almost every weekend. I was living in New York then, so I saw him only during trips home.

Food visits are a good-behavior incentive, allowed about five times a year. People on an inmate's approved visitation list can bring in home-cooked or store-bought food—whatever the prisoner asks for. My brother requested my sister's Betty Crocker brownies. He liked Greek salad topped with Buttermilk Ranch dressing that Mom made from a Hidden Valley mix, and her pan-seared flank steak with fresh flour tortillas; beef with broccoli, kung pao, and fried rice from Panda Express; eggrolls from Jack in the Box; pizza; and fluffy little pellets of chewable ice from Sonic Drive-In. None of these are foods I remember my brother liking when he was little. He had never been a fussy eater. In my mind, he was still the curly-haired boy to whom I'd feed spoonfuls of Breyers vanilla ice cream to stop his crying when Mom left for work at the laundromat.

One morning, my sister and I packed the day's meal into a thirty-four-quart Rubbermaid cooler. We picked up Mom at the house, then set off for the prison. Inside the main gate, we joined other families lined up before a folding table. An outsized corrections officer was there to inspect what people were bringing in. The prisoners called him Baby Huey. He picked through our cooler in search of forbidden foods: whole fruit (potential projectiles), meat on the bone (potential shivs), corn on the cob (potential moonshine). Then we walked through the Metor 200. On an earlier visit, my underwire bra had set off its red lights and we were sent away. This time, I knew better.

My brother came strutting into the visiting room. His hair was buzzed. So were his arms, to accentuate his tattoos. On the outside, he favored XXXL white Hanes T-shirts and baggy bluejeans belted just above the butt crack. Here he reserved for company his best uniform: orange pants hand-stitched up the leg to look like a

crease, and an orange T-shirt customized at the collar with elastic from a pair of briefs so it wouldn't stretch out.

"You look good," I said. "I like the outfit."

He smiled. "Does it bring out the color of my eyes?"

We got in a quick round of hugs—prolonged embraces are not allowed—and then my mother, shuffling in her Birkenstocks, set the plastic table with paper plates and napkins and disposable forks and spoons. No knives. All food has to come in pre-cut. Visitors can't bring beverages, and inmates can't handle money. While my sister and I pumped quarters into a vending machine, my brother stood by to supervise our selections. He wanted a Dr Pepper.

The informal code of conduct for visitors is that you don't make eye contact with other inmates, or with their guests. Yet there came a point when things got loose. People started swapping. "Trade you cake for rice and beans!" "How about some hot wings for a scoop of lasagna?" When Baby Huey wasn't looking, a skinny woman with a tight perm and an acid-washed denim jacket got affectionate with a greasy-haired inmate at the next table. It wasn't easy to ignore the sloppy kisses.

We went out to the yard and sat at a shaded metal table. The air was warm. In the near distance stood a low mountain with a saguaro at the summit. My mother admired it, then gazed at us dreamily. "It's so nice to have my three children together," she said. I shared a look with my sister. Classic Mom.

Prison rules require guests to take away any leftovers. My sister is as straight as they come—in school, she'd been a cheerleader, a cellist, Student Council president—but as we packed up to leave she handed my brother a ziplock bag of brownies. He tucked it into his waistband, then slipped it beneath the liner of a trash can. Other inmates did the same with their food; a deal had been struck with the porter, a fellow-inmate, who would take his cut. For the porter, it was evidently

worth the risk. He was eligible for food visits, my sister told me, but nobody came to see him. ♦

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Jaime Joyce is the author of “Moonshine: A Cultural History of America’s Infamous Liquor,” which was published in June.

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