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COLLECTIVE HUB

ISSUE 31

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*THE NEW
BURNOUT*

HOW TO BE
UNRULY

**AWAKE AND
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THE POWER ISSUE

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YOU ARE
BEAUTIFUL



BEHIND BARS

Instead of praying no one would ever know, PIPER KERMAN bravely outed the mistake of a LIFETIME and channelled it into everyone's biggest NETFLIX obsession – and a discourse on the US prison system.

WORDS MELANIE DIMMITT

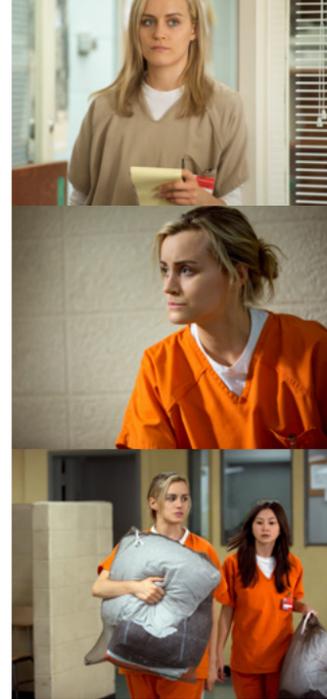
Losing your luggage is bothersome at the best of times. And it's a nightmare of cataclysmic proportions if it's stuffed with over US\$10,000 of drug money. This was 23-year-old Piper Kerman's reality when, two decades ago, the well-to-do college graduate from Boston found herself fallen in with an "impossibly cool" clique of lesbians. She was romantically attached to a woman who had landed her in the logistical throes of a heroin smuggling enterprise, accompanying said luggage from Chicago through Paris to Brussels on behalf of a West African drug kingpin.

As the saying goes, you couldn't write this stuff. But Piper did, publishing the story of her resulting 13 months behind bars in a minimum security women's prison, and the time spent alongside the members of an eclectic inmate community, after it all caught up with her years later. Sound familiar?

If Regina Spektor's shrill vocals are screeching through your head right now then you're one of the millions who have watched the immortalisation of her tale in the Netflix hit series *Orange is the New Black*, based on Piper's best-selling book of the same name.

"Of course it's daunting to write a memoir about the stupidest, most immoral thing you've ever done and what the consequences of that were," says Piper, who headlined this year's All About Women festival, down the line from her US base. "But that's what the story was. You can't hide it."

Four years on from her momentary meltdown in Belgium when her luggage didn't appear (the suitcase, as it turned out, arrived on the next flight from Paris)



and long-settled into a crimeless existence as a freelance producer in New York after she left it – and her lesbian lover – behind her, Piper's past came crashing back when two customs officers arrived at her West Village walk-up, saying she'd been indicted in federal Chicago court on charges of drug smuggling and money laundering. That was in 1998, and in 2004, a full 10 years after committing her offence, Piper was incarcerated.

"Much like what some folks have seen on the show, my then-boyfriend, now husband Larry [Smith, publisher of *Smith Magazine*] took me to surrender, to turn myself in to begin serving this sentence," she says, remembering the day she walked into the penitentiary, clutching a foie gras sandwich (burrata cheese on screen).

"I was incredibly frightened and mystified, because it was very hard to get any kind of substantive information about what to expect," she says. "Almost everything that was written that I could find about prison, about the experience of incarceration, had been written by and about men, so it was really hard to get any sense of what it would be like to

be an incarcerated woman."

Piper had entered the Federal Correctional Institution, Danbury in Connecticut focused squarely on "wanting to get this ordeal over with," but, corralled with hundreds upon hundreds of orange-clad contemporaries, she soon came to discover something rather surprising.

"Other women were really kind to me on that first day, and went out of their way to help me with very small things," she says, recalling how they'd gifted her a tube of toothpaste – a prison luxury only available for purchase at the commissary.

"Those very small gestures of kindness were not what I expected. Even on that

very first day in prison I recognised that the experience was not going to be what I expected, and that maybe what I was going to learn was not going to fit into all of our typical assumptions or expectations about prison or about prisoners."

One might expect, as she did, that prison should be rehabilitative – but the contrasting reality would see Piper become an advocate for the rights of female prisoners and, in August of last year, testify in congress, saying: "If any member of this [Senate Homeland Security Committee] had the opportunity to meet the hundreds of women that I did time with, you would probably walk away from getting to know those women with a deep feeling that their confinement in a prison cell was just a colossal waste, and not an appropriate way in intervening in the things that put them in the criminal justice system."

Female inmates, Piper says, are more likely to suffer from mental illness than their male counterparts, and at least 80 per cent have experienced sexual or physical abuse on the outside. They are much less likely to be convicted of violent crimes and, consequently, much

less likely to be violent when incarcerated – a reality overlooked in the television adaptation, no doubt for dramatic effect.

Artistic licence also saw the show's protagonist, Piper Chapman, sent to solitary confinement in the dreaded 'SHU' (Security Housing Unit) – a horror the real Piper "mercifully" never endured but has strongly spoken out against, much like the sexual harassment and assault of inmates by guards she also observed. No, she didn't have any sexual encounters herself in prison, however much of what happens in the series is true to Piper's time – her job assignment as an electrician, hours spent shackled (and busting) on a 'Con Air' flight, a surprise

reunion with her ex-girlfriend and the inclusion of a certain sassy, transgender fellow inmate.

"One of the things that I chose to write about at the very beginning of the process was Vanessa," says Piper of the transgender character. "Because, first of all, she's just a really interesting

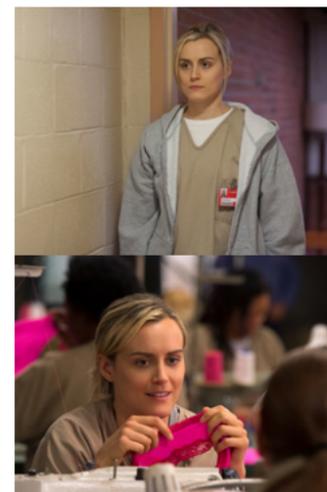
person in her own right, but her presence there in that community was very interesting. As were people's reactions to her presence, both positive and negative."

Known as the on-screen persona Sophia Burset, by way of actress and LGBT advocate Laverne Cox, Vanessa was Piper's 'neighbour' in prison, bunked a few cells down, and taught her "how to do the time instead of letting it do you" – a skill no doubt more enduring than others she acquired inside, such as how to mix concrete, or clean using a maxi-pad.

"Everything about the experience of being in prison is about taking control away from people," Piper explains. "You lose control over your life in a host of ways. Someone tells you when to get up, when you can take a shower, if you can make a phone call, what time you have to eat... so much decision-making is taken away from you. >

I think the experience of INCARCERATION is all about this struggle to REGAIN some sense of control over your own life.

IMAGES COURTESY OF NETFLIX



“So I think that the experience of incarceration is all about this struggle to regain some sense of control over your own life – recognising the things that you are not in control of, which are many, and focusing on the things that you do have some kind of power over, and hopefully investing yourself in positive ways of getting control over your own life, rather than negative ways.”

And remarkably, Piper says, entrepreneurialism is one way women find empowerment on the inside.

“The informal economy that exists within the walls of every prison and jail is really important. Most people who are in prison come from the poorest communities and the most vulnerable families, and you need to have money in prison, you need to be able to buy things like shampoo and toothpaste... and also edible food,” she laughs.

“So those economies are really fascinating, and there were lots of different examples of folks figuring out their own entrepreneurial way to survive. Whether it was doing things like hair or other kinds of grooming services, or laundry, there’s all kinds of different ways that people figure out, to hustle, basically.”

Surely, though, the plotline in season three of *OITNB* that sees inmates manufacturing underwear for an outside third party, syphoning some off to the side for a few days’ wear and then smuggling them out for sale to customers with a ‘prison-fresh’ fetish, is fabricated?

“Well,” smiles Piper, “Victoria’s Secret used apparel that was produced with prison labour for a while. I believe that they no longer do that, but that story is grounded in reality.” Federal Prison Industries, a government-owned corporation that reportedly employs over 12,200 inmates across 80 factories and three farms located at 62 US prison facilities, saw total net sales just shy of US\$472 million in 2015.

“Many, many corporations in the US use prison labour and they pay pennies on the dollar in comparison to what they would have to pay workers on the outside. And that’s true whether you’re talking about making license plates, fancy cheese or doing fish farming. I think people would be surprised to hear all of the different things that prison labour produces.”

Underwear production aside, with its fourth instalment due to air this year, Piper says that every new season sees the show drift “further away from the facts”

of her book – and she’s just fine with that, having very willingly let writer and producer Jenji Kohan, creator of the comedy-drama series *Weeds*, take the wheel.

“I was very grateful that somebody who had a provocative and very creative vision and approach

wanted to adapt the book, and I had a lot of confidence that she would do a wonderful job,” says Piper. She wasn’t wrong. *OITNB*’s first season saw it named the most-watched Netflix original series ever, usurping *House of Cards*.

“There are many differences between the show and the book. But on a fundamental level all of the themes from the book about race and class and gender and friendship and empathy are all there in the show and that makes me very happy,” she says. “What I really like about the show is that it’s not just about [Piper’s] character, it’s about this incredible range of female protagonists of every age and shape and size and colour and creed, and that is really exciting. That is a reflection of the real world. That’s what you want to see.”

Released back into the ‘real world’ in March 2005, one could certainly understand if Piper had chosen to slam shut this chapter of her life, begging the question: Was it tempting to not look back?

“Oh sure, absolutely,” she says. “And of course, what’s very important to recognise is that I had the good fortune and the privilege to be able to do so in a way that was not true for most of the women I did time with... I had a college degree and many years of work experience and, you know, racial and class privilege that most people in prison and jail don’t have.”

This is why she feels a sense of responsibility, “to help destigmatise what it means to have a felony conviction, what it means to have been incarcerated and what it means to have made mistakes and to have paid the price” – because largely, those chosen to be put away have already been marginalised.

“There are many different ways that people are pushed to the edge of the community. And we can make better choices than to put people in prison, for the most part.”

Piper now serves on the board of the Women’s Prison Association and teaches non-fiction writing to students in both a women’s and men’s prison, and while saying that if she could go back and persuade her younger self to do things differently, she would “in a heartbeat,” she has embraced the way in which her time served rendered her an “evangelist for failure”.

“We are always so in love with success stories – telling them and trumpeting them – but I think we definitely learn far more from our failures than our successes because we ultimately succeed only when we’ve done all of the growth that failure forces us to do... The ability to say, ‘What are the choices and the mistakes that I made, and what can I do differently?’ is very important because not only do you adapt and change to do things differently, but you also recognise that sense of agency and sense of ownership of your own life. That you’re the author of your own life.” ■

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