THE NEW YORKER

PERSONAL HISTORY JULY 24, 2017 ISSUE

THE LIFE OF A SOUTH CENTRAL STATISTIC

My cousin became a convicted felon in his teens. I tried to make sure he got a second chance. What went wrong?

By Danielle Allen

> We, who are in prison, had to answer for our sins and our lives were taken from us. Our bodies became the property of the state of California. We are reduced to numbers and stripped of our identity. To the state of California I am not Michael Alexander Allen but I am K-10033. When they want to know anything about me they do not type my last name in the computer but it is my number that is inputted. My number is my name. . . . Dante was not in hell due to a fatal sin but somewhere in his life he strayed onto the path of error, away from his true self. I, K-10033, strayed away from my true self: Michael Alexander Allen.

What sets the course of a life? Three years before my beloved cousin's murder—before the weeping, before the raging, before the heated self-recriminations and icy reckonings—I awoke with the most glorious sense of anticipation I've ever felt. It was June 29, 2006, the day that Michael was going to be freed. Outside my vacation condo in Hollywood, I climbed into the old white BMW I'd bought from my mother and headed to my aunt's small stucco home, in South Central. On the corner, a fortified drug house

stood like a sentry, but her pale cottage seemed serene, aglow in the morning sun. Poverty never looks quite as bad in the City of Angels as it does elsewhere.

Aunt Karen, my father's youngest sister, then drove a crew of us to collect Michael from the California Rehabilitation Center-Norco, which lies on a dusty stretch of Riverside County. Michael, the youngest of her three kids, was born when I was eight years old. I had grown up with him. The baby of a sprawling family, he was also *my* baby, a child of magnetizing energy and good humor. We had lost him eleven years earlier, when he was arrested, at fifteen, for an attempted carjacking. Now we'd get him back. It felt like a resurrection.

At the parking lot for Tower 8, a white van drove up to deposit the prisoners being released. Michael stepped out, saw us, and smiled. His broad, toothy grin took up half his face, a bright flash of white against his dark skin. He had a little bob in his step, the same natural spring he'd had as a child. His late adolescence and early adulthood had been spent in captivity, yet he bounded toward us like a fawn.

The homecoming party was in the driveway of my aunt's house, next to the postage stamp of a lawn. Uncles and friends, cousins and second cousins, and cousins who knows how many times removed pulled folding chairs up to folding tables, which were covered with paper tablecloths and laden with fried chicken and sweet tea. The merriment continued all afternoon, and seemed to attract some attention from the neighbors. More than once, a glamorous-looking woman drove past, slowly, in a low-slung two-door gold Mercedes sports car. Michael feasted and played Football Manager with the nephews and nieces who had been born while he was in prison.

After the party, we had little time to waste. That summer, I was telecommuting to my job as the dean of the humanities at the University of

Chicago. Michael, for his part, was intent on making something of himself. He had spent some time as a firefighter when he was at Norco, and he was ready to rebuild his life. Making that happen, managing his reëntry in the months to come, was my job. Not mine alone, but mine consistently, day after day, as the cousin on duty, the one with resources, the one who had been to college and who had become a professional.

The plans we had were not the plans we had hoped to have. Michael should have been paroled to a fire camp or to a fire station in Riverside County, where we had family who were ready to take him in. He could have lived there and gone to school and kept on beating back wildfires. But the rule was that you had to be paroled to the county where your offense was committed—crime-ridden Los Angeles County, in his case. So we developed the best alternatives we could. We made task lists, and moved through them efficiently. We met the parole officer, opened a bank account, and went to the library, where Michael got a card and started learning how to use a computer. (Google hadn't existed when he went to prison.) At the D.M.V., he took a test and got his driver's license.

Then, under the scorching sun of the deadliest California heat wave in nearly sixty years, we returned each day to the cool library and scoured Web sites for jobs. We focussed on large chains, which would have room for advancement, and sent out a lot of applications. Most of the time, Michael never got a reply. Then he caught a break: Sears invited him to a job interview. One morning in late July, he donned a new pair of khaki trousers and a button-down shirt, and we headed to Hollywood, to Santa Monica and Western. It was the perfect opportunity—but also, to me, a fraught one. A man who had been imprisoned for more than a decade would have to make the case that he ought to be hired. We had practiced bits and pieces of his story, but never the whole thing. In fact, I never heard Michael recount his own tale from start to finish.

I wonder now whether this was because the full version would have led me to ask questions that Michael did not want to answer. He had so much to give—stories, reflection, engagement—that somehow none of us ever noticed just how much he was withholding. He could love everybody on the terms on which they needed to be loved, give everybody what they needed to receive; and so, in the end, none of us really knew him. I've come to realize that he didn't quite know himself, either.

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

Michael Flynn's Guilty Plea

The trouble began in preadolescence. His mother got married to a man who had kept from her the fact that he had a criminal record, and who soon became abusive. Karen took her children to Mississippi and then to southern Georgia. There, a few months shy of twelve, Michael stole a jar of coins, amounting to something under ten dollars, from a white family across the street. He was starting to want things, impatiently, and he was also naïve, a California kid transplanted to the Deep South. Only out of naïveté could he have thought to steal from a white family in southern Georgia.

Rather than telling Karen and asking for the money back, the family pressed charges. It was Michael's first encounter with the law, and he went to court with his mother. Karen had by then filed for divorce and bought plane tickets to California. The judge told her the charges would be dropped so long as they got on the plane and never came back.

In the fall of 1991, Michael and his family moved to Claremont, where my father, William, taught, and where my mother, Susan, worked as a college librarian. For my cousins, my parents' house was a second home, screened with laurel bushes, framed by pink-blossomed crêpe myrtles, and shaded by a spreading loquat tree in front.

William and Karen—children of a Florida fisherman who became a charismatic Baptist preacher—were close, but their courses in life were not. My father, with the encouragement of a grade-school teacher, was academically ambitious, and he turned into a pipe-smoking, NPR-listening professor, a political scientist who chaired the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. He spent much of his days amid heaps of paper in a book-filled study, orchestral harmonies from the radio perfumed by the tweedy, comforting smell of pipe tobacco. Karen's story was different; she worked for a time as a certified nursing assistant, but bringing up three young kids while working full time was a struggle. Her ex-husband wasn't the first abusive man she had been involved with, and plans for furthering her education were often derailed.

Now, with my brother and me away at college, my parents helped Karen find an apartment a few blocks away. Michael took piano lessons from a stern, diminutive woman who had been my own teacher and who taught us how to sit up straight, "like the Queen of England." Michael earned money gardening for her, but resented the hectoring lessons about life that she delivered as he weeded.

He was becoming something of a rule breaker in Claremont. He and his new friend Adam were caught stealing chocolate-chip cookies from the school cafeteria, and sometimes had to be separated after making noise in class. Michael was also caught shoplifting at a nearby mall. Luckily, the store owner delivered Michael to my father, not to the police. But Michael's pattern of petty theft worried his mother, and my father; the weeding job was meant to deal with his need for money.

Then, in early 1993, a fire swept through the family's apartment complex, and they moved again, to the L.A. neighborhood of Inglewood. Although the area was scarred from the ravages of the previous year's riots, the move meant that Karen could be closer to her new job, at an organization called Homeless Health Care Los Angeles. It also meant that Michael started a new school year in yet another district.

We know something about his experiences as a student, because the State of California surveyed its youth during the 1993-94 school year. Forty per cent of ninth graders reported being in a physical fight; nearly sixty per cent reported seeing someone at school with a weapon. Gangs filled in for family; almost one in five ninth graders reported belonging to one at some point. Michael, then just shy of fourteen, seems to have flirted with the Queen Street Bloods, who were active on the west side of Inglewood; later, he started hanging with a friend from the Crips, a rival gang.

Michael was testing out a new world. But in that summer of 1993 he would also return to his old one, riding a bus back to Claremont to hang out with Adam. During one of those visits, Adam's parents were looking after the next-door neighbor's house, and the two boys let themselves in and took a radio and some other items. The neighbor reported a burglary, and when Karen realized who was responsible she hauled Michael to the police station. The boys returned everything. They were given a two-year juvenile probation, which entailed a curfew but no court date.

The narrative so far is familiar. A kid from a troubled home, trapped in poverty, without a stable world of adults coördinating care for him, starts pilfering, mostly out of an impatience to have things. In Michael's first fourteen years, his story includes not a single incidence of violence, aside from the usual wrestling matches with siblings. It could have had any number of possible endings. But events unfold along a single track. As we make decisions, and decisions are made for us, we shed the lives that might have been. In Michael's fifteenth year, his life accelerated, like a cylinder in one of those pneumatic tubes, whisking off your deposit at a drive-through bank. To understand how that acceleration could happen, though, another story is needed.

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> Like Dante I am forced to descend lower into hell to achieve a full awakening. I am forced into depression, scarred by obscenities, war after war, but each war that I survive I am a step closer to a full awakening of self. My hell is no longer demonstrating what I am capable of doing in order to survive. It has become what I can tolerate and withstand in order to live.

Consider the visible surface of Los Angeles. Underpasses, bridges, alleyways, delivery trucks, service entrances, corner stores, mailboxes, water towers, exhaust vents, and the streets—in the nineties, at least, all were covered with graffiti. Few can read that graffiti. I couldn't then, and have only now begun to learn how to decipher it. But it's a language that represents a world. It records deaths and transactions, benefactions and trespasses, favors done and owed, vendettas pursued. Laws and punishments. If you can't read that graffiti, you have no conception of the parallel universe, all around you, that is fundamentally at war with the legally recognized state. It's a regime with its own rules and penalties—in effect, a parastate. Michael grew up there.

Behind that parastate's economy and criminal-justice system lies the war on drugs. In the eighties, as the state sought to break the global drug-supply chain by rounding up low-level peddlers and deterring them with outsized penalties, the wholesalers established their own system of deterrence for gang members who served as retailers. If you didn't do what you were supposed to do, you were shot. Maybe in the knee first. If you riled the gang system again, you or someone you loved might be killed. The drug business, dependent on a well-established witness-suppression program, operates a far more powerful system of deterrence, with far swifter punishment, than any lawful state could ever devise.

In these years, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department created its first gang database. In 1988, after a much publicized drive-by shooting of a bystander, near U.C.L.A., the Los Angeles Police Department used the database to round up no fewer than fourteen hundred African-American youths and detain them in the parking lot of the L.A. Coliseum. More than eighteen thousand people were jailed in six months. Between 1982 and 1995, the African-American prison population in California grew from 12,470 to 42,296; the Latino prison population soared from 9,006 to 46,080. Los Angeles was a city ready to explode when the four police officers who had been caught on video beating Rodney King were acquitted.

When Michael stole the jar of coins in Georgia, and the judge dropped the charges, you might say that Michael met the "forgiving world." The same happened when he shoplifted, and when he stole the radio in Claremont, in 1993. But, back in the City of Angels, Michael met the unforgiving world. Nearly half the black men in Los Angeles between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-four were officially identified as gang members, and this simple fact of classification, accurate or not, affected that community profoundly. The angels had turned their backs.

The summer before Michael's junior year, in 1995, he began looking for a job.

His cousin Marc—my younger brother—had worked in a grocery store as a bag boy throughout high school, and Michael wanted a similar gig. But, at fifteen, he needed a work permit, and nobody in his mother's social network could help. He again began to roam the streets, and stayed out past his curfew. In math class, his grades plunged from straight A's to an F. Karen had conferences with Michael and his teachers, who told him that he was smarter than this. He countered, "I don't want to be smarter than this." On those warm summer days, he spent as much time as he could out-of-doors. Sometimes he would stand in front of the house of a kid he'd come to know. Karen spotted him once, lean and muscled, standing shirtless in khaki trousers—gangbanging gear. Although he was only four blocks away from her apartment, it felt like a different neighborhood.

Danielle Allen was the relative best equipped to guide Michael's reëntry.

Photograph by Matthew Tammaro for The New Yorker

Karen's last day with her boy was Friday, September 15th. Michael didn't have school. He went to work with his mother and hung out in her office. Then she took him to the Los Angeles Public Library, where she planned to meet him when she got off work, to take him shopping. But Michael was gone when she returned. The next time she saw him, he was in handcuffs.

Where were you when you were fifteen? When I close my eyes, I can still see a bedroom with a brass bed topped with a blue-and-white striped Laura Ashley comforter. There were matching valences on my windows, and I had a wooden rolltop desk, with a drawer that locked and held my secrets, including dirty letters that I couldn't at the time translate from a German boy with whom I'd had a minor romance at summer music camp.

I grew up in a college town where everyone knew my parents. They had made a critical decision, early in the lives of their two children, not to move until we had graduated from high school. I was a faculty brat, an insecure and often lonely child; the only time I ever got grounded was when my mother caught me sneaking a ride to French class with a friend. I was younger than most of my classmates at Claremont High School, and, although my friends all had their driver's licenses by the start of our junior year and I didn't, I wasn't allowed to ride in their cars. Eight years later, in L.A., my fifteen-year-old cousin, who also didn't yet have a driver's license, was arrested, for the first time, for an attempted carjacking.

It was September 17, 1995, a cool and foggy Sunday morning. Larry Smith, a lanky forty-four-year-old, was buffing the dashboard of his blue Cadillac Coupe de Ville in the alley behind his apartment, on Rosecrans Avenue. The street was lined with drab stucco apartment buildings, whose uncovered staircases led down to carports below. Michael appeared holding a chrome Lorcin .380, a cheap pistol prone to malfunction. An older friend, Devonn, a member of the Rollin 60s Crips, was apparently on lookout, but not visible to

Smith as he worked in his car. (Both names have been changed.) Michael approached Smith, told him not to move, and demanded his watch. Smith handed it over.

Then Michael asked for his wallet. When he found that it was empty, he tossed it back into the car. Then, as the police report recounted, Michael "tapped Smith's left knee with the gun and said he was going to take the car." According to Smith, Michael kept the gun pointed at the ground. Smith lunged for the weapon. They wrestled. Michael punched him. Smith gained control of the gun and shot Michael through the neck.

As Michael lay bleeding on the ground, Smith hollered to his wife to call 911. When the police arrived, they collected evidence and looked for witnesses, although no one had anything to say. Meanwhile, paramedics took Michael to a hospital, where he was treated for a "through and through" bullet wound that had narrowly missed his spine.

A police officer accompanying Michael in the ambulance reported that, "during transport, Allen made a spontaneous statement that he was robbing a man when he got shot." At the hospital, Michael was read his Miranda rights and additional juvenile admonishments in the presence of a second officer. According to the police report, he waived his rights and said again that he had tried to rob the man, using a gun that he claimed he had found about two and a half weeks earlier. He also confessed that he had robbed three people during the previous two days on the same block, and that he had robbed someone a week earlier, about ten blocks away. The police had no reports for two of the four robberies he confessed to; in the two that had been reported, Michael had taken twenty dollars from one victim and two dollars from another. In other words, on his way to the hospital, and upon admission, with no adults present other than the officers, a wounded fifteen-year-old talked a blue streak.

By the time Karen got to Michael's bedside, he had wrapped up his confession. The only thing he didn't mention was Devonn's involvement. Did Devonn suggest the crime, or provide the gun? We have no way of knowing. I don't believe that Michael was prepared, that morning, to be violent; he had a gun, but refrained from using it. Still, I was far away, a graduate student in England. Along the banks of the River Cam, I shared poems with friends and debated crime and punishment in ancient Athens. I had gravitated toward the subject upon being struck by how a sophisticated, democratic society had made next to no use of imprisonment. When the news of Michael's arrest came, it was stupefying. My brain raced in endless loops. *How could it be*? *How could it be*? I now have a sense of an answer. But there were harder questions ahead.

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> I'm trapped in a hell with whom society decrees to be the worst of living and better off dead. Robbers, rapists, child molesters, carjackers, murderers, and dope fiends who would spend their mother's monthly rent for a quick fix. And here I am, amongst them. As much as the mere thought disgusts me, I am one of them. Just another number, not deserving of a second chance.

Before his arrest, Michael did not have a criminal record. That day, he gained one with a vengeance. For the watch and the wallet, Michael was charged with robbery; for the car, attempted carjacking. Both charges were "enhanced" because of the gun. He was also charged with the two earlier robberies. Four felonies, two from one incident, and all in one week.

Eighteen months earlier, in March, 1994, California's Three Strikes and You're Out law, the nation's first, had gone into effect. Once you were convicted of your third felony, it meant twenty-five years to life, or a plea deal. If Michael pursued a jury trial, convictions on at least three of his four

charges would trigger the law. Worse, this was happening at the high point of L.A.'s panic about carjackings. In Los Angeles County alone, the number of carjackings had nearly doubled between 1991 and 1992, from 3,600 to 6,297. In 1993, the state legislature had unanimously passed a bill that made carjacking an offense for which sixteen-year-olds could be tried as adults. Two years later, the bar was lowered to fourteen. A Los Angeles *Times* article titled "Wave of Fear," which ran the year before Michael's arrest, quoted then Senator Joseph Biden saying, "Name me a person in L.A. who has a fender-bender and doesn't fear an imminent carjacking. Yes, it's still remote, but you're in the statistical pool now. It's like AIDS. Everyone's in the pool now."

California's legislators had given up on the idea of rehabilitation in prison, even for juveniles. This is a point that critics of the penal system make all the time. Here is what they don't say: legislators had also given up on retribution. Anger drives retribution. When the punishment fits the crime, retribution is achieved, and anger is sated; it softens. This is what makes it anger, not hatred, a distinction recognized by philosophers all the way back to antiquity. Retribution limits how much punishment you can impose.

The legislators who voted to try as adults sixteen-year-olds, and then fourteen-year-olds, were not interested in retribution. They had become deterrence theorists. They were designing sentences not for people but for a thing: the aggregate level of crime. They wanted to reduce that level, regardless of what constituted justice for any individual involved. The target of Michael's sentence was not a bright fifteen-year-old boy with a mild proclivity for theft but the thousands of carjackings that occurred in Los Angeles. Deterrence dehumanizes. It directs at the individual the full hatred that society understandably has for an aggregate phenomenon. But no individual should bear that kind of responsibility.

On February 5, 1996, four and a half months after Michael's last night at home, he sat in court, in an orange jumpsuit and handcuffs, as the judge told

him to choose whether to stand trial and face a possible conviction of twenty-five years to life or to plead guilty and take a reduced sentence. The judge didn't say how much the sentence would be reduced, but he did say, "Please take the plea."

Michael could not choose. Now sixteen, he asked his mother to decide. Karen went outside the courtroom and prayed. "God told me," she says, "that he would only get seven years, versus risking a trial of twenty-five years to life. I made the decision." So Michael pleaded guilty. A few months later, he learned that his "earliest possible release date" was June 29, 2006. According to Karen, the only time Michael cried in court was when he got sentenced.

When you're sixteen, the farthest back you can remember is about thirteen years, to the age of three. Michael's sentence was almost equivalent, in psychological terms, to the whole of his life. It stretched past what was for him the limit of knowable time. The mind cannot fasten onto this sort of temporality; we are unable to give it concrete meaning in relation to our own lives. The imagination wanders into white space. For Michael, it was, he later wrote, "a mountain of time" to climb. It would be a steep one. The moment he turned seventeen, he was transferred to adult prison.

"How could it have happened?" is the question everyone asks. Where were the lawyers? What did your family do? I think back to the stolen radio. Michael came from a family who believed that if you did something wrong you admitted it, you fixed it, and you suffered the consequences. Michael was guilty of the attempted carjacking; he was going to have to suffer the consequences. Our family trusted in the fairness of the criminal-justice system. At each turn, we learned too late that this system was no longer what we thought it was, that its grip was mercilessly tightening, that our son would be but one among many millions soon lost in its vise.

When we read that the point of the Three Strikes law is to lock up repeat

offenders, we do not think of the fifteen-year-old who has just been arrested for the first time. An underground nuclear test is conducted, and the land above craters only much later. This, I think, describes the effect of the Three Strikes law and the slow, constant escalation of penal severity. An explosion occurred underground. The people standing on the surface conducted their lives as usual. They figured out what was really going on only after the earth had collapsed beneath them.

The years between the ages of fifteen and twenty-six are punctuated by familiar milestones: high school, driver's license, college, first love, first job, first serious relationship, perhaps marriage, possibly a child. For those who pass adolescence in prison, some of these rites disappear; the ones that occur take on a distorted shape. And extra milestones get added. First long-term separation from family. First racial melee. First time in solitary, formally known as "administrative segregation." First time sodomized.

Between his arrest and his sentencing, Michael was mainly in Central, the juvenile prison, where only parents and legal guardians could visit. When Michael and I reconnected properly, in the late nineties, he was making his way through Chino—a notoriously tough prison—before landing in Norco. Its full name was the California Rehabilitation Center-Norco, but little rehabilitation was on offer. There was the obligatory library, but no classes past the G.E.D. level. In the nineties, college and university classes were scrapped because of budget cuts, and the state and federal governments ceased providing prisoners access to Pell Grants for correspondence courses. Higher education, once seen as an antidote to recidivism, had come to be seen as a privilege that inmates hadn't earned.

After I started teaching at the University of Chicago, in 1998, Michael and I began talking regularly on the phone. Once he was at Norco, I began to visit him, too, every other week in the summer and during the Christmas holidays. Michael would call at least once a week, sometimes more, except when the

prison was on lockdown owing to outbreaks of violence. Then weeks might pass without a word. I was a good phone partner, because I could afford the astronomical collect-call charges. Every call began with a reminder, a robotic voice saying, “This is the California Department of Corrections. Will you accept the charges?” And then, every fifteen seconds, as if we could forget, there was another interruption: “This call has originated from a California state prison.”

Michael, who had already completed his G.E.D., desperately wanted to go to college, and I understood his desire to learn. I believed in education; I believed in Michael. So I researched how Michael might be able to get a college degree. On November 8, 2001, Michael sent me his application to Indiana University’s Program in General Studies, and I mailed it with a check nine days later. He would aim for a bachelor’s degree. The day he was admitted was as exhilarating as the day I received my fat envelope from Princeton, thirteen years earlier.

There was a catch, however. No hardcover books were allowed into the prison. Michael could enroll only in classes for which the textbooks had soft covers. I made a round of phone calls. The remaining choices for introductory classes were Intro to Ethics and Intro to Writing and Study of Literature. Michael chose the second, Lit 141. I paid the fees and ordered the books.

New Year’s came and so did the Bible, the Odyssey, the Inferno, “The Canterbury Tales,” and “Persian Letters.” But there was no shortage of distractions, and Michael had trouble completing the assignments. At one point, suspected of participating in a “racial melee,” he was transferred to Chino and placed in solitary, until an investigation absolved him. A year later, he repeated the class. This time he churned out one essay after another, with readings that were full of insight and personal connection to ancient texts. He was finding his voice. “I don’t take kindly to seeing myself in Hell but Dante’s

writing makes it impossible to just read without visualization," he wrote in one essay. "It is the life I live in Prison which to me is Hell. . . . I think of Dante's use of ice as nothing but a mere deception. Ice within itself is enticing to the burning soul. Ice can get so cold that it burns flesh. And it's parallel to any sin committed on earth."

Along the way, Michael fell in love. I remember his words on the phone: "I've met someone, Danielle. She's beautiful." And I remember my sense of confusion. Met someone? How? Where? I was thinking of the female guards whom I'd got to know in the course of my visits. But in a fumbling way we came to understand each other. Michael had fallen in love with a fellow-inmate who had implants or hormone-induced breasts, and who dressed and lived as Bree. (I've changed the name.) She was, he said, unquestionably the most beautiful woman in the prison. He hadn't told his mother, and he made me promise not to say anything. He knew Karen would be upset and he feared she would judge him, as he trusted I would not.

Like freedom, desire was dizzying to Michael. A month later, he mailed me a piece of writing unlike anything he had ever sent me. "The world has change and brothas far from the same," he rapped, and continued:

> Am I losing my mind
>
> No; I think I found it
>
> Realizing greatness in one's self is very astounding
>
> and truth be told, I recognize a King
>
> cause when I look in the mirror all I see is me
>
> And us, so please trust, we can't be touch
>
> standing together forever is a necessary must.

Soon afterward, he sent me Bree's annual prison shot. She was posed as a woman, lying on the floor like a sports pinup, made up and in colorful clothing. Why did he love her? He loved her because she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He loved her because, of all the men in prison, she had chosen him—and that was a gift of surpassing value. But it was also a gift that came to blind him. When he was finally released from prison, I failed to grasp that he was not yet free.

Upstairs, in the Sears personnel department, everything was beige and brightly lit. I settled into a metal chair and waited while Michael had his interview, in an office down the hall. I did a lot of waiting that summer, but I never questioned why I was there. My brother and I had long ago formed a tight circle with Aunt Karen's three kids—Nicholas, Roslyn, and Michael, each born about two years apart—and, as the oldest, I was always the one in charge. As I waited, I typically spent my time thinking about my task lists, about what had to be done next. Forty-five minutes into this particular wait, the door opened and I learned that the managers had offered Michael a job as an inventory clerk.

It felt as if time had begun. I could imagine a future, even a happy ending. There was still school and housing to be arranged, but we were steadily assembling the pieces of a possible life, as if doing a jigsaw puzzle. The goal was for Michael to work full time and to enroll in one of California's famed community colleges. No one in his immediate family had a degree, but I was in my element—pretty much my deepest expertise was in going to school.

Los Angeles Valley College, in Valley Glen, was the obvious place, a decent school with good general-education courses and—our goal—a fire-technology program. The subway's Red Line had stops at Santa Monica and Vermont, about a mile from the Sears, and in North Hollywood, not too far from campus. We battled our way through the thicket of federal financial-aid forms, visited the tutoring center, and hungrily collected flyers posting

apartments for rent.

We needed a place cheap enough to manage on Michael's wages. Together, we searched the listings, drove by addresses, and made calls and appointments. We landed on a promising place on Ethel Avenue, in Valley Glen, a few blocks north of the college. The advertisement was for a studio apartment in a converted garage behind a modest home. Once again, Michael practiced telling his story, and we scheduled a visit.

The home was impeccable, a white bungalow circled by a white iron fence. Alongside the fence stood some small shrubs, neatly tended, and rosebushes spraying white flowers. I went up to the house by myself. Two women met me at the door, a mother, perhaps in her sixties, and her daughter. Dressed in linen trousers and a black T-shirt, I introduced myself. I was a professor, I told them, and I was helping my cousin, who had recently been released from prison. He had just enrolled at Los Angeles Valley College and been hired at Sears. I would be paying his deposit and guaranteeing his rent. He'd been sentenced as a young person and this was his second chance. Were they willing to meet him and hear him out?

They agreed, and I sat outside while Michael spoke to his prospective landlords. He could charm anyone with that bouncing gait and electric grin. Finally, the three emerged, in good spirits, and the women took us around to the back to see the studio. It was clean and peaceful, and equipped with a hot plate and an electric heater. I could imagine being comfortable there. And it was walking distance from the school.

Michael said he wanted it; we all shook hands in the gaze of the late-afternoon sun. I was moved by the trust and the generosity of these two women, and I still am. Driving back to South Central, my mood was all melody. I imagined Michael felt the same. Little more than a month out and here he was, with a driver's license, a bank account, a library card, and a job.

He was enrolled in college, with a clean, safe, comfortable place to live. This was a starter set for a life, enabling him to defy the pattern of parolees.

I dropped him off in South Central and headed back to Hollywood, expecting to sleep soundly for the first time in a while. But that night Michael called. He wasn't sure he should take the apartment. I felt a stone drop to the bottom of a well.

Why not? I asked.

He couldn't explain, he said. He just didn't feel quite right about it.

I told him to sleep on it, and when we talked in the morning he told me he wanted the apartment after all. Relieved, I headed off to collect a cashier's check for the security deposit, and Michael headed off under yet another cloudless sky to his job at Sears. At midday, he called me again: Had I taken the check over yet? He said that he had changed his mind again.

"Michael, what on earth are you talking about?"

He told me that he wasn't sure what it would be like if his associates came by.

The word surprised me, but I didn't ask him what he meant by "associates." The purpose of the word, somehow, was to insist on his privacy, and it brought me up short. I paused, didn't ask questions. I told him to think about it some more. Disagreement was rare for us.

He called me a few hours later. He said he would take the apartment and asked me to pick him up after work. Then, just before I did so, he called again. "I've made up my mind," he said. "I don't want the apartment."

My memory of the conversation is hazy, but it's likely we exchanged some sharp words. His plan, it emerged, was to live with his mother and to ride the

bus the nine miles from there to Sears and the ten miles from there to Los Angeles Valley College, and then the twenty-two miles home—through the worst of Los Angeles traffic. It was madness, but there was nothing I could do. It was well into August. School would start soon. I would have incoming students to welcome, new faculty to orient, budgets to plan. I bought him more khakis and button-down shirts, spent as much time with him as I could. A few weeks later, I headed back to Chicago.

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> The root of sin is lust and the desire to satisfy that lust. . . . Lust only creates wanting and wanting creates greed and greed burns Flesh. It is lust that causes us to believe we have to have something at all cost. This is my suffering, this is my hell. 24 hours all night. There is no day. My soul in its entirety is in darkness.

The jigsaw puzzle soon fell apart, and college was the first piece to go. The commute was just too much; I doubt Michael made it through even two weeks of classes. The job, meanwhile, lasted until November, when I got a nearly hysterical call. Michael said he couldn't do it. He was drowning. He wasn't going to make it. When I left L.A., I had promised him that if he ever needed me I would be there. After the call, I went straight to the airport, and arrived in L.A. just in time to take him to dinner.

Michael was teary and despondent. After work, he said, some of his Latino co-workers had called him a nigger. He fought them in the parking lot, and walked away from the job. Never told his bosses or co-workers that he was quitting—just didn't return. So now he was back to square one. Worse than that, really, since he'd proved himself unreliable to an employer. He was mostly spending his time at home, playing video games with his nephews. He no longer saw a future for himself.

I mainly tried to listen; I didn't have much to offer. I could promise to get him into an apartment, if he could get another job. But I was no longer in a position to stay and help him find one. I had too many obligations in Chicago. November was tenure-review time, with mounds of papers to read and unending cycles of meetings that the dean, in particular, was not supposed to miss. My professional reputation was at stake. Michael would have to make the next push for himself.

When I visited L.A. just before the winter break, it seemed as if Michael had made that push. He had found an apartment, he told me, and was ready to put down a deposit. Could I come and see it? The place was on the fourth floor of a vintage Craftsman-style building overlooking the 101 freeway. It was big and spacious, with gleaming wood floors. As I wound through the rooms, Michael began telling me about how he and Bree wanted to move in.

I had no idea he was still seeing Bree, let alone making plans to move in together. My face must have conveyed surprise, though I tried not to react too strongly. (Learning how to suppress visible emotion is an occupational demand of being a dean.) I told him that I wanted to know what the job situation was. Had he lined up a new gig? What did Bree do—did she have a job? Our voices echoed in the empty apartment. Michael leaned against a windowsill, the sky and the freeway shining behind him.

There was something shamefaced in him as he answered. No, he didn't have a job. Bree was into hair styling, but, no, she didn't have one, either. What, exactly, were they thinking? Michael didn't have much of an answer. Plainly, the plan involved taking advantage of me to some degree.

In that moment, I encountered a different Michael from the one I knew. I saw something calculating, something I'd never seen before. I didn't ask to talk to Bree, who I'd come to realize was the woman in the gold Mercedes crawling past our homecoming party. All I was able to say was that I couldn't

possibly pay the deposit—plus some number of months' rent, plus co-sign a lease—when neither of them had a job.

Michael's face tensed. He said he understood.

This was the day I understood that the idea that I could stand my baby cousin up on his own two feet was a fantasy; it had always had too much of me in it. From this point on, Michael ceased confiding in me. Our phone conversations never burrowed below the surface. I no longer knew how to help.

Michael spent more and more time with Bree, whose possessiveness was violent. According to Karen, Bree cut Michael three times between December and May, and each time Michael tried to pass the injuries off as the result of someone attempting to rob him. He had also begun to suspect Bree of cheating. Late one night, he sneaked under her window, in the hope—he told me later—that catching her in the act would give him an easy out from the relationship. That night, he got into a fight with a lover of Bree's, and the police were called. Michael went straight to prison for a parole violation, and remained there for around a year.

It was a catastrophic defeat. Despite the fact that we wrote each other letters, I somehow obliterated from my memory all traces of Michael's second stint in prison. When he got out again, just months before the 2008 stock-market crash, he returned to what we hoped would be the comfort of his mother's house. Just a short time later, though, he began living with Bree.

In the months before Michael's parole violation, Karen and Bree had waged a battle rooted in a strong mutual dislike. Now Bree sought a formal treaty. She called Karen to say that Michael would be living with her, and that she didn't want any conflict. This was hard for Karen. She knew that her son's relationship was violent. As Karen understood it, Bree had been in prison for

attempting to kill a boyfriend, and the only time she had seen Michael get physical with anyone was when he fought Bree on her pin-neat front lawn. Bree had been going down the street, breaking car windows and throwing things at Karen's house. Michael had gone outside to warn her away. The two came to blows. Through a window, Karen saw Michael knock Bree out. That night, Karen added to her prayers the hope that the Lord would liberate Michael from his misery.

By December, Michael's world had fully contracted. While living at Bree's house, he became known on the street as Big Mike. That winter, he revealed to his sister a gun, hidden in a towel, in Bree's Mercedes. By the spring, he was running drugs, including at least one trip to Texas. Later, the detectives investigating his murder found PCP in his room.

In June, 2009, I got married, in New Jersey, where I had recently accepted an appointment at a distinguished research institute. Michael came to the wedding—his first airplane flight since his release. He was handsome in a beige jacket and crimson shirt, with matching crimson alligator-skin shoes. But there was so much I couldn't see: I couldn't make out the demons chasing Michael as he greeted the other guests at the door to the chapel.

Five weeks after that champagne-filled wedding day, my father called me from Maryland with the news: Michael had been discovered in a car in South Los Angeles, dead from multiple gunshots. I was in England, and I remember my father's voice, the careful, clipped speech of a retired professor, crackling as if through the first transatlantic cables. Heading to the airport, I knew that the police were looking for a woman, and that Bree had disappeared. Two weeks later, she was charged with his murder.

She had, evidently, shot Michael in her kitchen. There had been one witness, a middle-school-age boy. He hadn't seen anything, but he had heard voices and gunshots. With the help of relatives, Bree cleaned Michael up nicely. She

then bundled him in a blanket, put him in his little hatchback, and drove him to the street corner where he was found. Three accessories—all members of Bree's family—were also charged. Eventually, Bree pleaded no contest to voluntary manslaughter, and was sentenced to twenty-two years in prison. Having by now undergone gender-reassignment surgery, she was sent to a women's prison.

Michael and Bree had first met and become lovers when they were both inmates at Norco, which she had entered at the age of twenty-five. Bree was a little more than two years older than Michael. She was just his height and just his weight, a transgender woman still early in the process of transitioning. As far as the public record reveals, she'd been convicted for assault with a firearm.

I thought back to Michael's homecoming in 2006, to Bree cruising by in her chariot, coming for to carry Michael home. We all had thought the relationship ended when Bree left prison a year ahead of Michael, and we believed that Michael's home was with us. What Michael himself thought or wanted that homecoming day, I will never know. He hadn't invited Bree to the picnic. Yet she came and would stay.

When Michael contemplated renting that tidy little studio apartment on Ethel Avenue, with its white fence and pearly roses, it was voluptuous Bree in her tight clothes and gold Mercedes whom he was visualizing having to introduce to those kindly landladies. How would it have gone if he had taken this "associate" home with him? When he spent those twenty-four hours dithering over whether to rent the apartment, I see now that his real choice was whether to repudiate the first and only love of his life. He chose Bree, and it would prove to be his life's defining decision.

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> There are those who await to fulfill their destiny. I see in them a sincere and apologetic heart for their ill misdeeds. They are the one who will change the world positively or positively change someone's world. Hell cannot hold the latter of the two opposites but in time will only spit them back out into society to do what is right. The hell that I live in cannot hold Dante. Hell can test and try one's self but it cannot hold Dante and it will not hold me. In the *Inferno*, the dead are trapped forever. Surely, the biggest and most important difference in the Inferno and my hell called prison, is that I have a way out.

Bethlehem Temple, Karen's parish, mounted a funeral service like those from my childhood, when I visited my grandfather the Baptist preacher. There were soul-busting songs and unpainted, teetotalling women; women in hats, with fans, on the verge of fainting. Karen had to be held, and the preacher lifted the roof off. We wept enough to make our own riverside. *Oh, we'll wait till Jesus comes / Down by the riverside.*

The service was followed by a brief lunch back at Karen's house, and then it was onward to a second service, at the church that Michael belonged to. The street had turned out for this service, bringing its jive step. The place was filled with people we didn't recognize. The detectives were here, too, working. They hadn't yet solved the murder of the man they knew as Big Mike, and were watching to see who showed up. The pastor had nothing to say about Michael; instead, he spent the eulogy giving himself credit for the worldly success of this or that parishioner, before descending into an anti-Semitic rant about moneylenders and lawyers.

Where was Michael in all of these remarks? He wasn't there. Not in those words, or, in fact, in his casket. We'd had a viewing a few days earlier. I'd been taken aback, seeing him, his still face so sombre in repose, with a slightly grayish tinge. In the satin-lined casket, he was dressed in the very suit he'd

worn to my wedding, a month earlier. I was struck by his solidity. I had never noticed how much he had bulked up. In the casket, there was no smile. The light was gone, and with it, I suppose, the lightness. Later, much later, writing this, I've had to face the fact that on that day I was looking at Big Mike, not at little Michael. The hardest part of my effort to understand what happened to my cousin has been learning when and how Big Mike replaced Michael.

After the service, we went back to Aunt Karen's house to celebrate what we called Michael's homegoing, his passage to the promised land. Next to that postage stamp of a lawn, we gathered around folding chairs pulled up to folding tables, laden with fried chicken and sweet tea, to commemorate the baby of the family. We had lost him at fifteen to jail; we regained him eleven years later. At twenty-nine, he was lost to us again, gone for good. My cousin's idea of hell was to be reduced to a number; now he became a statistic, joined to the nearly two hundred thousand black Americans who have died violently in the years since his arrest on Rosecrans Avenue.

In my heart's locket, five gangly brown-skinned kids, cousins, will be forever at play beneath a pair of crêpe-myrtle trees bathed in June sunshine. Michael and I loved to climb trees. An arm here, a leg there, juts out from the trees' floral sundress, a delicate skein of pink and purple blooms. When we found unbloomed buds on the dichondra lawn, we would gently press at their nubs until the skins slit and fragile, crinkled blossoms emerged whole. Meanwhile, inside the house, through the living-room picture window, the adults, beloved, pass their time in glancing, distracted talk. ♦

This article appears in the print edition of the July 24, 2017, issue, with the headline "American Inferno."

Danielle Allen is a political theorist and the James Bryant Conant University Professor at Harvard. She is the author of, most recently, "Cuz: The Life and Times of Michael A." Read more »

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