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TEN HORRIFIC YEARS IN JAIL FAILED TO BREAK ROSEANNE CATT'S INDOMITABLE SPIRIT, AND FROM THE DAY SHE WAS CONVICTED OF CONSPIRING TO KILL HER HUSBAND SHE HAS NEVER WAVERED IN THE FIGHT TO CLEAR HER NAME. BY DAWN VOLZ

■ 'I ask you, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, is the defendant some sort of witch, the Witch of Taree? I think not. In some ways, she reminds me of Joan of Arc, who was a saint, and what did they do to her? They burnt her at the stake as a witch.'

The scene is the NSW Supreme Court in September 1991 and the said defendant, facing charges of attempted murder, is Roseanne Catt, a petite, immaculately groomed 44-year-old blonde—successful businesswoman, churchgoer and pillar of the community.

Roseanne had 'made it' despite being the youngest of seven children of a dirt-poor rural family, who left school at 15 and became a teenage bride and mother of two. At 33 she split from her bullying husband and, with business nous and hard work, became a respected lady about town.

The nightmare began when Roseanne succumbed to the charms of the local Lothario—a self-styled Elvis lookalike who drove a flashy pink utility. Their marriage went sour within days when he attacked Roseanne and his four children.

Things went from bad to worse, and when he and Roseanne faced off in the Family Court on 8 August 1989 she was awarded trusteeship of both his thriving smash repair business and his children. Enraged, he vowed to turn the tables on her.

Less than two weeks later, in an early-morning raid by nine police officers, Roseanne was arrested, handcuffed and bundled into a police car under the glare of the media spotlight, charged with assaulting, stabbing, poisoning and conspiring to kill her husband.

It's a saga of lies, sex, greed, violence and corruption that could easily be the plot of a Hollywood movie but, as Roseanne recounts in her recently-published book *Ten Years**, back in the late '80s it was all too incredibly true.

'There's been huge public interest in my story,' she tells *Warcry*, 'and much as I'd like to forget those horrendous memories

I've taken a stand. We think the law's there to protect us, but I'm sorry to say that's not always the case.'

Beyond reasonable doubt?

After her arrest Roseanne spent three weeks on remand in Sydney's notorious Mulawa women's prison before being freed on bail. 'On that first terrible night in jail I thought of Lindy Chamberlain,' she says.

In granting bail, the presiding judge expressed 'profound scepticism' about the charges on a number of grounds—that the case was 'one of bitter matrimonial disputation' and 'in the same unsavoury background the husband [Barry Catt] had been charged with alleged sexual offences against his children'; that the case relied on Barry Catt's dubious credibility because of his treatment for hypomania; and that the neutrality of the investigating detective, Peter Thomas, a close friend of Barry Catt's, was in question.

In spite of the judge's reservations, Roseanne was eventually committed for trial on 7 May 1991 where, she says, the prosecution painted her as a scarlet woman, and she became 'tabloid fodder', with lurid allegations of assaults on Catt with a 5.5 kg-rock and a cricket bat, possession of a pistol, spiking Catt's milk with lithium and inciting others to kill him.

Defence counsel maintained that Catt and his mate Thomas—who, Roseanne says, harboured a long-held grudge against her after his failed attempt to convict her of arson following a fire at her deli business in 1984, and her rejection of his sexual advances—had used standover tactics to terrorise witnesses into giving false evidence.

Catt's four teenage children supported Roseanne's allegations that he had assaulted them, with the eldest, Sharon, making headlines—'Girl tells of dad's porno film party'.

At the close of the gruelling four-month trial Judge Jane Matthews gave the jury a stark choice. Roseanne was either 'an evil, manipulative woman, or the victim of a monstrous conspiracy'. After two-and-a-half

days of deliberation the jury opted for the former. 'Guilty, your honour.'

Six weeks later when Roseanne's sentence was passed, pandemonium broke out as she was led from the court in a state of shock.

'Twelve years...12 years...' the inmates chanted as she went back to jail.

'It's not something I can remember even now without tears,' she says.

On the inside

Roseanne Catt—prisoner 180828—spent 3,652 days in jail.

'There was nothing about jail that I could identify with in any way,' she says. 'It was terrible, but I refused to fall into a black hole and give up.'

She was under duress from all sides, suffering not only the vitriol of the 'screws' but the hostility of, and bashings by, some of the inmates. One of the prisoners—visited in jail by Catt and Thomas—was 'inciting people to kill me', Roseanne says.

Drugs, intimidation and corruption were rife, and there was little or no attempt at rehabilitation. 'There's nothing corrective about Corrective Services,' she adds.

Though a model prisoner, she was often denied her basic rights and pushed from pillar to post by prison officers, rumoured to be in cahoots with Catt and Thomas, intent on breaking her will.

How did she endure such a horrific existence? Roseanne attributes her inner strength to an overriding faith in God.

And sceptics should note she's no Johnny-come-lately Christian. 'From the time I can remember,' she says, 'God was always part of my life, as Mum was a very staunch churchgoer.'

'While I was in jail I used to have a very open line to God. Often I would say to him "I can't take any more", and he would always give me a life raft; a kind word, a nice smile, maybe a telephone call or a letter. While at the time it was hard to see the purpose and plan I didn't question it. I knew God was there.'

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Roseanne attended chapel every Sunday (often the only attendee) despite ridicule and abuse, but 'slowly these people could see there was something in my faith' and the women began turning to her in times of crisis, with many joining her at the church services.

Fighting for justice

In 1993, after 18 months in prison, Roseanne's hopes for a successful appeal against her harsh sentence were dashed when she heard on the radio, 'Roseanne Catt's appeal was dismissed today...'

'I was in a black fog; ill for two days,' she said, 'but realised I would achieve nothing by fixating on the injustices of my life.'

Six years passed before Roseanne was to see a glimmer of the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel when an elderly solicitor named Bruce Miles came to visit her. 'Girl, this is the most grievous miscarriage of justice in Australia's history,' he told her.

Two energetic Christian women, Mary Court and Joan Murray, who often visited the jail, joined forces with Miles, and the Free Roseanne campaign was up and running.

Their crusade gathered pace after an exposé of the bribery and corruption of cop-turned-fire-insurance-investigator Peter Thomas (who left the force shortly before Roseanne's trial) was aired by journalist Wendy Bacon in *The Sydney Morning Herald* and on the ABC's *Four Corners*—which also alluded to Thomas' stitch-up of Roseanne.

'I still see it almost as a miracle how, during very difficult periods, certain people emerged to help me through,' Roseanne says.

One of those people was Sister of Charity nun Claudette Palmer, who visited the jail and knew Roseanne, but had been warned by prison officers to give her a wide berth.

After Palmer attended a Free Roseanne public meeting, she became one of Roseanne's staunchest allies, picketing the office of NSW attorney-general Bob Debus for two weeks, handing out leaflets and collecting signatures for a Free Roseanne petition.

With public scrutiny mounting, Roseanne was freed on bail after a decade in jail. Though elated, she says she left prison with mixed feelings, 'sad at leaving many of my friends behind'.

'I just don't like to see injustice. There were thousands of women who passed through the prison gates and I could >>



Free at last: Roseanne Catt, flanked by her support team including sister Claudette Palmer, far right, after being released from the Emu Plains Correctional Centre. Pic courtesy AAP

» count on one hand the women who really needed to be taken out of society; the rest could have been dealt with at community level. Jail is not the answer.'

Life after prison

While relishing her freedom and coping with the culture shock of mobile phones, ATMs and credit cards, Roseanne was not diverted from her fight for justice.

In the meantime, *60 Minutes* had been chasing her, and with some reservations she appeared on a segment entitled 'Roseanne, the Cop, and Her Lover', only to be 'ambushed' by being shown tapes of the now grown-up Catt children retracting the evidence they gave at her trial and making 'horrible claims' against her.

Only later did she find out that Thomas had been 'actively spruiking' the Catt children to *60 Minutes*, and that they were pursuing a victims of crime compensation payout.

'It was one of the most painful moments in a decade of agony,' Roseanne says.

By now used to notoriety, and prepared for the inevitable backlash, she was surprised to find that 'suddenly, people who knew the truth were outraged and started calling my legals'.

In 2003 a judicial inquiry was held into Roseanne's conviction, with Judge Thomas Davidson complaining that proceedings had been 'beset with allegations of interference by witnesses'.

Undaunted, Roseanne and her 'guardian angel' and right-hand person Palmer pressed

on, aided and abetted by her 'wonderful support network'. 'I call them "God's Girls", but there's also some men,' she laughs.

The wheels of justice ground slowly but inexorably on, and in August last year the Court of Criminal Appeal found there 'was significant fresh evidence available which, if accepted by the jury, would support the conspiracy allegation'.

This favourable judgment, however, came with a sting in the tail. While seven of nine convictions were struck out, two charges of assault and malicious wounding were upheld, with the director of public prosecutions to decide whether Roseanne should be retried.

'I am also innocent of these two charges,' Roseanne told the media, 'and I feel as if I'm still living under a cloud, but it's still a victory.'

A terse announcement by the DPP a few weeks later that remaining charges against Roseanne would not be proceeded with had the lawyers closing their books on the case. But not Roseanne, who wants to take her case to the High Court in order to clear her name.

Looking to the future

Now living with her son in 'the little country town that I was born in', 59-year-old Roseanne Beckett (her maiden name—'one could understand the name Catt doesn't sit well with me') says life is good.

'I'm very independent,' she says, 'but with the help of kind people I've managed to survive. I don't have anything except God, my daughter Julie, my son Peter and my support

network, but I still enjoy every day.'

There is no man in her life—'I'm so fussy,' she says with a laugh, but Palmer and God's Girls give her continuing support, especially in her fight for compensation.

'I'm hoping to live a normal life and assist the many women who are asking for my help. I'd love to be able to travel, I'd like to write more books and use my experience to change the system.'

Do the shadowy spectres of Catt and Thomas give her sleepless nights? 'I don't allow them to cause me to live in fear,' she says feistily, 'but we are continually aware that these people are capable of anything.'

Bloodied but unbowed, Roseanne has no doubt that justice will prevail and her tormentors will eventually be called to account.

'They will be. I know so. This assurance I have is of God, so why should I waste energy on bitterness or anger when God's dealing with it? I don't feel resentment. I don't feel any hate. I have peace and calm and that's of God.'

And while the story of Roseanne Catt and her epic fight for justice might not make it to Hollywood, don't be surprised to see a TV miniseries sometime in the future.

*Published by Pan Macmillan Australia, RRP \$30.00

