The large visiting hall at the California state prison system's Vacaville facility, some seventy miles north of San Francisco, hums with the noise of wives, girlfriends, and children who have come to visit those serving time in maximum security. Hand-lettered signs proclaim "Sitting On Laps Is Prohibited." Nevertheless, an elderly woman presses her face into the lap of the haggard, gray-haired man sitting before her in a molded plastic chair, his eyes fixed on the ceiling as if in prayer, his hips cautiously moving up and down. Throughout the hall jackets and sweaters conceal hand movements that only briefly relieve those doing penance to society. In the midst of all this, one pale wiry young man tries desperately to explain.

"I'm not that unusual," he says earnestly, his sharp green eyes searching for comprehension. "You've seen me before. I'm any hustler you've seen standing on a corner. I'm any junky you've seen on the street. I'm anybody you've sat next to in a gay bar. I'm any prisoner you've ever known."
THE PRESIDENT'S NEPHEW

"I'm anybody's nephew—it doesn't mean much that I'm also the President's nephew." He pauses briefly, contemplating the parallel structure he has extemporaneously constructed. "I am this country—this room is America."

A handful of dissident prisoners founded the Symbionese Liberation Army in this room some years back. Today, however, the most subversive activities are sexual, restricted to what tremulous lips and hidden hands can perform. But Willie Carter Spann—the son of President Carter's sister, Gloria Carter Spann—has long since become oblivious to the "sacraments" performed around him in this chapel of laws and lust.

Willie is trying to explain the crime and kinship that have gained him the status of the First Family's persona non grata. This, of course, is no easy title to capture when the competition includes the likes of Uncle Billy. Still, Willie seems bemused that the media, from Hustler to People to Good Morning America, scrambles for interviews with him.

"I'm just a petty thief who happens to be related to the President," he says. "We were all nobodies until Uncle Jimmy got elected, but I think I'm the only one who will admit I was a nobody."

For all this serite, Willie does not want to be misunderstood. He worries he might sound stupid, although he easily alludes to a panoply of authors ranging from Dickens to Hunter S. Thompson. Other reporters have jumped at the chance to interview a Carter who talks freely about crime, homosexuality, drug addiction, and off-color family remembrances. "The media has raped me a couple of times," Spann says cautiously. "Doing an interview is like going into an interrogation without your Miranda rights."

But more than anything Willie is lonely, eager to escape the five-by-seven-foot monotony of solitary confinement. He waves off the $1,000 interview fee he has charged publications such as the National Enquirer, welcoming the chance to explain his troubled life to someone who might understand. Willie's life, he insists, is something of a social parable—even if it took avuncular fame to make people listen.

Like Uncle Jimmy, Uncle Billy, and mother Gloria, William Carter Spann was born in the Wise Clinic of Americus, Georgia. His father was an Air Force test pilot, who took Gloria and Willie to live with him in Texas. But Gloria, "an adventurous young lady," soon grew restless, deserted her husband, and trundled infant Willie back to the Carter family home in Plains.

While Gloria cavorted with gentlemen callers, Miz Lillian and her husband became mom and dad for Willie. Billy Carter (ten years Willie's senior) and Gloria became his brother and sister. Willie still recalls the hours teenage Billy spent at his bedroom window with a pistol, shooting tin cans off the family's white picket fence. Only fierce sibling rivalry with Billy marred these happy early years.

Willie's childhood happiness faded rapidly. The turning point came when a strange man in a 1946 Pontiac drove up to the grand family house in Plains to take Gloria and Willie away to a poor dirt farm in the country.

Spann taps his fingers on the formica tabletop as he begins this part of his story. He talks of spiders in the outhouse, of the endless culinary configurations of peanuts made necessary by a tight budget: boiled peanuts, baked peanuts, raw peanuts, peanut butter. Worse, there were beatings.

"Every time my step-dad saw me, he saw my mom's first husband," Spann recalls, "so he beat me." Willie began seeing the outlines of monsters in the shadows that flickered across his bedroom wall at night. "But I was more afraid of my stepfather than the monsters."

Willie taps his fingers more rapidly and rocks back and forth in his molded plastic chair. He tells of the nights he stuffed pillows under his bedspread and slept on the floor beneath his bed, in order to evade his cantankerous guardian. "I believed my step-dad was going to kill me. I just didn't know when." He became hyperactive and was treated, he says, with regular doses of the then-popular ritalin.

The rest of Spann's childhood reads like the archetypal biography of a delinquent-turned-criminal. He became the Plains tough guy. This came in handy when Uncle Jimmy, then a school-board member, proposed that blacks be given a new school. Cousins Jack and Chip, the "nigger-lover's" sons, needed a protective escort—which was often as close to school as Willie came.

"The whole idea of doing good in school was to reflect good on my parents," says Spann. "I didn't want to reflect good on anybody."

Spann got as far as the eighth grade. ("My seventh grade teacher liked me too much to flunk me," says Spann.) His parents sent him off to military academy, where pre-teen alcoholism earned him a quick dismissal.

When he was fourteen, Spann's parents had him declared "incorrigible" and sent to jail. "It was a lot more fun than home," says Spann. "I didn't have to worry about my father coming and beating me up." Released at eighteen, Spann joined the Air Force; three months later he went AWOL, stole a motorcycle, and destroyed the officers' putting green, an escapade that resulted in a year in the stockade.

Spann returned to Plains and worked in Uncle Jimmy's peanut warehouse. But an argument with Billy Carter ("that fat, slobering, over-the-hill drunk") soon brought this respite to a dramatic end. Sheriff's deputies caught Spann speeding toward Billy's gas station with a revolver; Spann was sent briefly to a mental hospital; from there Spann hitchhiked to Los Angeles, read City of Night, and became a hustler.

"All you had to do was come and get paid," recalls Spann. "It was an ego trip. I was out there, didn't have any family, and needed, I mean really needed, to be wanted."

Certainly homosexuality was not an outrageous course to follow for a youth
who had spent years in prison before he was even old enough to buy a beer. "You get love where you find it," says Spann. "In prison, there's only one way you find it." Still, Spann managed to maintain both heterosexual and gay affairs during his early twenties, even when he helped run a "puppy farm" of fourteen- to seventeen-year-old hustlers. He got the pick of the litter, but he also had girlfriends and even a wife (the immature boys "didn't offer any chance of a relationship").

A burgeoning interest in drugs forced Spann to look for additional income; he received the invitation to his uncle's 1970 gubernatorial inauguration in jail, while serving time for burglary. Although Carter sometimes corresponded with Spann, sending him the latest tapes by the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, and Jimi Hendrix, little else remained of the long-frayed family ties.

Once released, Spann took up with another girlfriend ("When I have a nice lady," he maintains, "my bisexual life goes all to hell"), but his preoccupation with drugs soon had him back in prison for parole violation.

Willie is wound up tighter than a conductor's watch. He keeps an eye on my cardboard coffee cup, offering to buy a refill the moment it's empty. He anxiously grabs any chance to walk across the visiting hall to the vending machine. The longest uninterrupted hike he can take in his cell consists of precisely 3½ steps. But the chance to talk face to face with someone represents an even more precious opportunity, and as soon as Willie counts out every nickel of change he launches into the story of his most recent criminal activities.

"It's all sort of blurred," says Spann, pointing to the peacock tattoos covering the needle marks that once dotted his arm. He tried to get jobs from a gay referral service, only to have the counselor make a pass at him. "Besides," he adds, echoing a common complaint of ex-offenders, "what do you say when they ask you where you've worked the last ten years? The penitentiary?"

The cards were stacked against any reformation from the start. Lacking enough money for a Castro Street flat, Spann moved into San Francisco's sleazy Tenderloin district—the only neighborhood he and many other ex-offenders can afford. "I remember the first day I
was there,” says Spann. “I went to the store for two packs of cigarettes. I came back with one pack of cigarettes and two balloons of heroin.”

Somewhere in the subsequent blur, Spann got married and found a “crime partner,” a local hood with a fondness for young boys; the pair soon set to capering. Willie preferred burglary; his partner, with a bevy of teenage boys to support, leaned more towards armed robbery. Spann learned the art of brown-bagging. His first target, the Mint, was one of the city’s oldest gay bars.

Spann taps his fingers again as the scenario unfolds. “I was real nervous at first,” he recalls. “Then I saw this eighteen-year-old kid making a fool of himself and all of these lechers figuring out who was going to take him home. I knew him. He was me.”

Just after last call, Spann got the bartender’s attention and quickly thrust a pistol between his eyes. Spann’s brown bag was soon filled with bills. “I couldn’t believe how easy it was,” he says. “But I knew that I’d either end up in the morgue or back in jail after a few months. I was so stoned I didn’t care much which.”

The Tavern Guild (San Francisco’s gay bar network) put out a reward for Spann and his partner. The tension and the drug use mounted; Spann’s partner became increasingly trigger-happy. “I think the only reason he pulled robberies was to shoot somebody,” says Spann, “so he could be a big man.” A robbery at the Grubstake (a gay burger joint near Polk Street) became a near-homicide when Spann’s partner almost shot a deaf-and-dumb dishwasher who wouldn’t heed calls to empty the cash register. Spann’s partner finally shot a beer gaffer at a gay bar in the Tenderloin, wounding him critically.

While Uncle Jimmy’s name made national headlines, Willie’s grasp on reality faded. “One day it hit me,” he says. “What am I doing knocking over windows to get a bag of heroin when my uncle is running for President? That’s when the thread broke.” The police eventually caught Spann’s partner, who promptly implicated Spann in nine robberies. But even the trial seemed like a dream to Willie, though he now maintains he’s glad he got caught when he did.

“I hate gay bars,” he says. “That’s why I robbed them. People paying ninety cents a beer for friendship. It’s good they caught me, because once I robbed all the gay bars, I was going to rob every pawnshop, every bail bondsman. All the people who were preying off society.”

Spann spent three months in jail before the dreamlike haze lifted. By then, Uncle Jimmy was well on his way to being elected President of the United States, forcing Spann to grapple with being the “family fuck-up” in one of the world’s most prominent families.

Spann darts from our table to the coffee machine. Black prostitutes, who have come from Oakland to visit their unlucky pimps, stare at him as he paces to the machine—as if something in Willie’s gait might reveal a trace of his lineage. Spann is articulate and far more aware than most in the room; but one striking similarity ties him to the other prisoners. He doesn’t smile. Willie returns with another cup of coffee and precise change. He’s tired, but he can’t waste any time on small talk. He’s got too many important things to say. “I am this nation,” he repeats calmly. “I’ve seen every part of American life from the Carter family to junkies. You’ve seen me before.”

Visiting time ends promptly at 3:30 p.m. The guards usher the visitors out

“We’re headed for a little relaxation in Key West.”
while Willie and the other prisoners—all sexual outlaws now—shuffle back through the bullet-proof iron doors that lead to the cells. His uncle is the most powerful man in the world, but Willie is just another prisoner, walking back to a tiny cell to be alone.

II

Willie can pinpoint his last day of freedom exactly: March 25, 1976. “When I got to county jail,” remembers Spann, “somebody said, ‘Do you know your uncle is going to be the next President of the United States?’ ‘Sure,’ I said, ‘Jimmy Carter doesn’t do anything unless he’s going to win.’”

If Spann’s filial ties have provided the major conversation piece for his current prison term, they have also been responsible for his most profound psychological trials. Columnists reacted gleefully when Chip Carter made a brief appearance outside the Mint—the very bar Chip’s cousin had robbed—to court the gay vote for his father. When Willie emerged as a minor campaign issue, candidate Carter solemnly told of how the young man had been “in constant trouble all his adult life.” Since then neither Carter nor the White House has had anything more to say about or to Willie.

To be sure, the most embarrassing aspect of Spann’s notoriety stems from his willingness to discuss homosexuality; although Spann considers himself, at best, to be bisexual, with decided heterosexual preferences. He shifts easily from talk of his male lover at San Quentin to the girlfriends who routinely visit him (he seems particularly satisfied with a blossoming romance with an intelligent young businesswoman from San Francisco).

For all his hetero proclivities, however, Spann has a hard time understanding why his frank discussion of prison love should be so sensationalized by the press. “The sexual trip happens because you’re close to somebody,” he says. “It’s just love. You’re showing love for another person.” Unburdened by gay political rhetoric, Spann seems almost naive. After all, he asserts, love is love. He neither plays down his homosexuality nor plays up his heterosexuality.

Something of a lost little boy emerges when he contemplates his family. The stepfather who once beat him is now an honored Shriner. The mother who had him locked up at fourteen has gained the public-relations glow of a madcap family eccentric with a penchant for Hondas. Ruth found God and is pulling in hefty crowds on the evangelist circuit. (“Some women use vibrators,” Willie muses. “She uses God. I guess it’s all right—everybody has to come somehow.”) Only Uncle Billy has bared the dark side of the Carter family psyche. Miz Lillian alone, on whom Spann cannot lavish enough praise, writes to the young prisoner—a monthly correspondence that often includes Polaroids of her globe-trotting adventures. To the rest of the Carter clan, Willie is just a throwaway.

“Every time I turn on the TV and see my mom or Aunt Ruth in the Bay Area, promoting a book or something, it really hurts,” says Willie, his green eyes growing vacant. “I think of all the opportunities I’ve missed.”

However loose his First-Family ties, they still represent the greatest influence on Willie’s life. Spann’s notoriety makes him a likely target for thugs trying to carve a reputation, so prison authorities keep him in a small, isolated cell off the prison mainline. Charles Manson, mass-murderer Juan Corona,
and the famous Kemperer killer, who variously ate or stuffed members of his family, have also been lodged in this celebrity wing. Spann’s closest neighbor and best jailhouse friend is Norman St. Martin, one of Detroit’s Purple Gang.

 Guards consider their ward something of a curiosity, an exotic animal caged in their personal zoo. When news of Uncle Jimmy’s commutation of Patricia Hearst’s sentence spread, about fifteen of Vacaville’s finest congregated around Willie’s cell. “He’s your uncle,” they laughed. “Why doesn’t he help you? Maybe if you bought a newspaper you could get out.”

 The media provides some of Spann’s only friendly interactions. “I admit I get off on it,” says Spann. “I never had anybody take my picture before all this.” Still, they usually ask all the wrong questions; they never focus on the important issues he can address, like the black comedy of how he and tens of thousands like him get caught in an endless cycle of recidivism.

 During our second interview, Spann insists that he’ll escape “the system” once he is paroled in December. But he’s vague. A few days later, I pick up the paper to see that media-savvy Willie has saved the details for San Francisco’s leading gossip columnist: Spann will marry the businesswoman who has been visiting him for several months.

 III

 It’s not your typical wedding scene. The bride steps gingerly through the metal detector in the prisoners’ visiting hall, which has been converted into a makeshift chapel, its molded plastic chairs stacked neatly in a corner. The wedding guests have their bags searched; the ushers wear pistols and handcuffs.

 The best man is a one-time member of the Purple Gang. Charles Manson has sent regrets that he cannot attend. Eight guests—all that prison authorities would allow, not including three reporters from nearby small-town weeklies—have been thoroughly screened weeks before the service.

 For bride Jane Frey the romance had started inadvertently, when she helped negotiate a magazine deal for Spann last year. A mutual acquaintance prodded Frey to correspond with Spann, which in turn led to her first personal visit in October. Spann’s proposal in February, and finally to this April morning when Frey found herself driving towards Vacaville wearing a Forties-style blue-and-white jersey dress and singing, “Get me to the church—I mean, prison on time.”

 Certainly Frey was no flighty dreamer out to fulfill a gun-moll fantasy with the President’s nephew. A graduate of the Sorbonne, the mature forty-one-year-old insurance broker cuts an assertive and articulate figure. Her work with Harlem gangs and San Quentin convicts has given her experience with those who have fought not only society’s laws, but a system of justice that can create as many problems as it may solve.

 Frey thinks Willie is changing. “I remember when I first met him,” she says. “He never smiled. Now, he’s finally starting to grin—not the cold prisoner’s grin, but a real smile.”

 This is getting corny. Is she upset about Willie’s sexual background?

 “It doesn’t bother me that he’s done everything,” says Frey matter-of-factly, leaning back as the van speeds towards Vacaville. “Besides, lots of people have done everything but don’t admit it.”

 Once past the photographers and security checks at the prison gate, the wedding party files into the visiting hall. Willie hugs Jane and beams. “I’m never going to have to go to the Tenderloin again,” he says, to no one in particular. Quickly, he changes into a white, loose-sleeved Indian shirt he has borrowed from a photographer, tucking it into his neatly ironed prison denims.

 Reverend Bill Hauserl arrives from a nearby church in his blue double-knit polyester jacket and white tie.

 "No, I did not break up with Marcia. We just decided to take separate vacations until death."
He's clearly nervous at the sight of reporters, but has counseled the couple and decided that they're very much in love—which, he concludes curtly, "is the only thing I care about."

Armed guards watch smilingly from the sidelines as the couple exchanges simple vows. Afterward, Spann pulls Reverend Hausler into a traditional group wedding photo. "I want my family to know this was respectable," he jokes. Willie smiles almost preternaturally as he goes through the rounds of handshakes and kisses. "I've never known there could be love like this," he enthuses. "This is the first time in my life that I've ever had a group of people be glad about something good that was happening to me."

He gathers everyone around him. "My family is here," he says triumphantly. "I just looked into a friend's eyes here and I could tell he cared for me. I can say that I love him too. It doesn't matter that he's a man. Jane has put so much love in my heart that I love everyone here."

The small-town reporters look at each other curiously. They came to cover a prison wedding, not a dissertation on the androgynous qualities of love. Still, the very sincerity of Spann's discourse belies its apparent naiveté. The guests move closer as he develops his theme. "All my life," he says, trying so hard to explain, "I've only gotten attention when I fucked up. I never knew it could be like this."

Soon the guards explain that they have an upcoming noon meal to monitor. They begin ushering the guests back towards the gates. Willie tries to sum up. His parole is set for Christmas Eve. With a wife and comfortable apartment awaiting him, he figures "I've finally got a reason to stay out." As the last guests file through the electronic gates, Spann stands alone—smiling—in the silence of the vast, cathedral-like visiting hall.

Contributing editor Randy Shilts covered Willie Carter Spann's wedding for the Washington Post. An urban affairs reporter for San Francisco's KQED-TV, Shilts's work has also appeared in the Village Voice, New West, National Public Radio, and the San Francisco Chronicle and Examiner. The history of Willie Carter Spann presented herein is based entirely on information provided by Spann. The White House did not respond to Shilts's request for a comment.

**THE DIRECTORS**

BERGMAN

Someone whipped you as a child, very hard. Someone scarred you, and kept scarring you. Now your portraits drip a refined red, and your women are constantly in labor. I hate to see them any more—poor, poor women. I hate to see the glass in their vaginas, the complexions puffy with tragedy, and the bellies bursting. I don't like glass in my insides any more than they did. And I don't care how often you've laughed, and whether or not you have an equal sensitivity for joy. You have hurt me too deeply, taken me to a desk where the nuns held me down and broke my hands with rulers. You've beaten me like your parents. It is only when I want blood, blood, that I come to see you.

COCTEAU

Death was full of answers. You saw her driving a Rolls Royce, saw her black, saw her as a procuress. She got all the best lines, and made the final sacrifice. How strange to not be able to make our own sacrifices, but have death make them. I suppose it will be that way, in the end, she with her severe black hair, tuning us in on her short-wave, and planning the final script. I suppose she will be impossibly beautiful, and probably very interesting. I, for one, want her to divert me from the things around me. How sad it would be in my last moments to be preoccupied with reality.

And after all, why shouldn't she have her way? We belong to death. And those who own us, have the right to torture us.

BUNUEL

I corner Senor Bunuel, and ask him many questions.
I ask him why Mexico City is falling into the sea.
I ask him why the Mexicans' bowels rumble when they make love.
I ask him why parrots fly in pairs out of the jungles, instead of flying singly.
I ask him why Rockefeller, or was it Truman, destroyed Diego Rivera's beautiful mosaic with a sickle.
I ask him why his women pull on little boys' penises to say hello.
I ask him why Genevieve read to me from her prayer book at dusk.
And how did she get across the border in the first place?
And I ask Senor Bunuel why my happiest years were spent nestled against the border of his great country; why I have been unable to recapture that happiness since.

Why I always feel as if I were leaving, with plastic rattling on the car windows, and dope stashed in my hubcap.
And Senor Bunuel laughs.
He hits the tip of his silver cane twice on the ground.
Then the women, with their black braids, come and lift me up and put me in one of their white ovens. And they sprinkle me with many herbs and spices, saying, "When you come from our ovens into a new life, you will be sweet. Then you will not ask so many questions."

—Mark Hensley
Gwyn Metz: Gwyn Metz is fascinated with the play of light and the effect it has upon how subjects are perceived. As a photographer she works to capture this fascination on film. Metz studied at the School of Visual Arts in New York and at the University of New Mexico. Her work has been exhibited in New York, Santa Fe, Albuquerque, and Tempe, Arizona, and has appeared in numerous publications here and abroad. She is involved now in creating a series of light abstractions directly on film in the darkroom, which correspond to her abstract-realist photographs taken directly from life. Metz also has an intense interest in landscapes and people. The following portfolio illustrates how she uses the simplicity of an image to delve beneath the facades of her subjects and reveal more elusive aspects of their personalities.—The Editor