

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Imagining Is Believing

I was in the library researching an essay about blindness when I spotted, on a shelf of books about disease, a copy of Susan Sontag's *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. The book was way off my topic, but when I'm writing I'm always desperate for distractions — the more off-topic the better. I sat down on the library floor to read.

Soon I came upon the following sentence: “The incarceration in detention camps surrounded by barbed wire during World War I of some thirty thousand American women, prostitutes and women suspected of being prostitutes, for the avowed purpose of controlling syphilis among army recruits, caused no drop in the military's rate of infection — just as incarceration during World War II of tens of thousands of Americans of Japanese ancestry as potential traitors and spies probably did not foil a single act of espionage or sabotage.”

The latter episode I had, of course, heard about, but not the former. American women — thousands of them! — locked behind barbed wire to prevent the spread of venereal disease?

Kicking myself, as I often do, for my lack of historical knowledge, I checked the library catalogue for books on the subject but found none. Could I be so ignorant that I didn't even know where to look? I asked my history-major parents, my AIDS activist friends (who, I figured, must be aware of this direct precursor to the frequently suggested AIDS "solution," in the 1980s, of quarantining HIV-positive individuals), but none of them had heard this startling fact either. Now I knew I must be onto something.

Eventually I discovered a few excellent chapters within scholarly texts, and I used these leads—plus the help of a blessedly patient interlibrary-loan staff—to track down original documents about the government's World War I campaign against women: "Eliminating Vice from Camp Cities"; "The Segregation of Delinquent Girls and Women as a War Problem"; "The Girl Problem in Wartime." With an eavesdropper's queasy thrill, I read manuals for the special agents who were assigned to the task of rounding up suspected venereal disease carriers. The manuals advised them on where to find "wayward" girls and how best to apprehend them. ("Take a trolley to the town's amusement park, if it has one. Skip the well-lighted parts and visit the outskirts, where darkness or semi-darkness is a shield to conduct.") One government officer, I learned, hid late at night in the bushes of Boston Common, waiting to pounce on unsuspecting girls.

I was most interested in the girls themselves, but as much as I looked, I found nothing written by, or from the point of view of, a detainee. The official reports were the work of military men, doctors, and social workers—all statistics and moralistic jargon. In the rare event that girls were referred to individually, they were seen as mere case studies:

Gertrude C.: Seventeen, reported as being immoral, going to Camp Meade to meet soldiers. She acknowledged having sex relations with three men.

At first I hoped this scant information might be enough to lead me to the women. I did the math: if any of them were still alive, they'd be just over one hundred years old. Not likely, but not impossible. Could I search old directories for Gertrude C.'s near Camp Meade?

On my way back to the library on the day I planned to begin my hunt for survivors, I found myself thinking about Gertrude, or a girl like her (whom I pictured as dark-eyed, with loosely curled hair that drew sunlight and attention), wondering how such a girl would have felt . . . You're seventeen, flush from a night of dancing and from the excitement of walking through the city with a young man by your side (thinking, *How far will we go? Could he be the one?*), when a stranger leaps out from the bushes. You're hauled into a guarded building, where your legs are forced apart by a doctor who pokes cold tools inside you. You can't dispute the charges lodged against you because there are none. No lawyer or judge can set you free. You're sick, they say, so they can keep you here indefinitely. You're sick and a menace, too. A traitor.

When I got to the library, instead of heading to the stacks for more research, I sat down and started making notes for the novel that became *Charity Girl*. Suddenly I understood that the lack of firsthand witnesses (I had to admit the chance of finding one was nil) shouldn't stand in my way. I could write about what had happened to these women because I could *imagine* it. Wouldn't this imagining, in fact, be the best way to honor them? After all, it was a failure of imagination, a failure to empathize with people from different classes and social backgrounds, that had led to the incarceration of women during the war. And war itself, at the most basic level, is nothing if not a failure of imagination: an inability or unwillingness to put oneself in another's shoes and to seek solutions that recognize "the enemy" as a people — as one person, and another, and another, each with his own fears, desires, and complications. I'm optimistic enough to believe that novels — which, for both

writer and reader, are extended exercises in empathy — can be a potent antidote to inhumanity.

Many of the detained women were prostitutes, but a great number of them weren't. I found myself especially drawn to imagining the "charity girls," those who "picked up" men for the sheer fun of it and for the attendant perk of a night on the town — and who, by our contemporary standards, were doing nothing illicit or even unusual. Social standards change, but I don't believe the human heart does. I kept thinking: these girls had the very same hopes and urges that we do now, but they were made to feel wicked just for wanting to express their sexual desires.

The worst kind of shame, a friend once wisely told me, is the shame that comes from not even realizing you were meant to feel ashamed. That's what these charity girls must have suffered, I was sure. And although I'm a man and I was born three-quarters of a century after they were, I've certainly experienced that kind of shame myself: It's the way I felt as a boy, when I learned I wasn't supposed to be attracted to other boys. I drew on this feeling as I began the tough but thrilling task of recreating a forgotten world, as well as on the feelings shared with me by HIV-positive friends, who, like the women locked up during World War I, are condemned not for a crime, but for carrying a disease.

In the summer of 2001, when I began researching *Charity Girl*, the most compelling historical comparison to the government's World War I anti-vice campaign was the one Susan Sontag had made, to the detention of Japanese Americans during World War II. A few months later, the World Trade Center was destroyed; a year and a half after that, America once again went to war. And once again, my government began passing emergency legislation allowing it to invade citizens' privacy in the name of "security." Once again, my government was rounding up people it deemed a threat and locking them behind barbed wire with no charge, no trial, no recourse.

I had chuckled, reading history books, when I'd learned that

amid the anti-German hysteria of World War I, sauerkraut had been renamed “liberty cabbage.” Now, scanning the newspaper before I started writing for the day, I read about U.S. congressmen calling French fries “freedom fries,” and the joke didn’t seem so funny.

I set out to write this novel in an attempt to understand the past. Now that the book is finished, I realize the extent to which it’s also an attempt to better understand the present. Can we sacrifice some liberties in the hope of saving others? What does freedom mean when some among us are banished?

The novelist’s art is one of serendipity, and I often think back to the accident — or was it fate? — of having stumbled upon the topic for this book while researching blindness. What injustices, I wonder, are we blind to right now? What are we not seeing because we fail — or refuse — to look?

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