

APRIL 1996

by Sarah Wang

When I was sixteen, I spent thirty days in Central Juvenile Hall, a 22-acre juvenile detention facility that houses both female and male inmates in Los Angeles, California.

It was 1996, the year that would see Bill Clinton's reelection, Michael Jackson's announcement of the pregnancy of his first child, mad cow disease in Britain, the introduction of Ebay, and the gathering of over 200,000 people at the Lincoln Memorial to march for children's welfare at the "Stand for Children" rally.

Colored contact lenses were popular, especially among Asians. I was booked early one morning in April with one purple and one green contact in my eyes.

That morning: a routine monthly court date as stipulated by the terms of my probation; sitting bleary-eyed on a bench with my mother.

What I didn't know, all those mornings spent in court before I was handcuffed and led to the back hallways unseen by the public, was that inside the core of the building were cells, elevators, and detention chambers where shackled prisoners were led by guards.

Shielded from the public, prisoners are unseen and unheard. Their—although here and throughout this text I resist using a different pronoun: *Our*—invisibility is what allows for the perpetuation of not only violence and abuse but systematic and legalized action against incarcerated people.

Through juvenile courts and the adult criminal justice system, the United States incarcerates more of its youth than any other country in the world.

Juvenile, as defined by law, is a person below the age of 18. In other words, a child.

At Central, there was an eight-year-old boy in detention for setting a house on fire.

I had been arrested six months prior to that court date in April for the possession of stolen property and placed on a year's probation.

Behind the legalese is a story.

Let's go to Tijuana, Colleen suggested, pulling a stolen gas card out of her back pocket. That weekend, we took the keys of her adoptive parents' old car, and backed out of the gravel driveway.

Neither of us had a driver's license. We hadn't reached the legal driving age.

Cutting through the inland basin, Colleen and I made our way through Southern California's various microclimates, the overcast morning quickly yielding to the smog-filtered sun on the I-5.

At a gas station, we filled the tank of the Chevrolet and loaded up on candy, air fresheners, energy drinks, and sunglasses.

We never made it to Tijuana. In San Diego, after smoking a six-foot bong, for which we had to stand atop a kitchen table to reach while another person lit the bowl from below, Colleen and I headed back to Los Angeles. We were in tears, paranoid, certain that we would crash or drive off the road.

Prisoners are not allowed to have a story. Their lives are expunged with a swift backhand: Criminals are, in the legitimizing structure of the carceral system, already guilty.

A few girls in jail wore orange jumpsuits, indicating a serious or violent offense. I heard that one girl had been pushing her baby in a swing at the park when the baby fell and died.

For girls can also be mothers.

Girls outnumber boys in rates of detention and arrest for status offenses, behavior that is only considered illegal when a person is less than 18 years of age, such as truancy, curfew violations, and running away.

A study on trauma in the juvenile justice system reveals that unaddressed trauma attributes to the criminalization of girls. If trauma is not resolved, it leads to high rates of drug and alcohol use, involvement in violent activity, and development of mental health problems. For many adolescent females, there is a strong link between experiences of neglect and abuse, a lack of appropriate treatment, and behaviors that lead to arrest.

If trauma is not resolved... How does one resolve trauma at the age of eight, thirteen, sixteen?

A week later, we were arrested when the cops came and Colleen confessed to stealing the gas card.

I was named. Naively, I confessed to eating the candy, wearing the sunglasses, and consuming the energy drinks bought with the stolen gas card.

It didn't seem so bad at the time. In many ways, it was as if the arrest hadn't happened at all. An hour at the police station, fingerprinting, a succession of light-bulb flashes.

On the outs, which was what we called the world on the other side of the jail walls, my preferred uniform consisted of: purple and green contact lenses, twenty-hole Docs, fishnet stockings, a pierced tongue, half-shaved head, slip dress, and silver dog collar encrusted with blue rhinestones. I thought of myself as a Chinese Courtney Love.

For violating my probation, for staying out past curfew and skipping class, I was sentenced to thirty days in detention by the judge.

The criminalization of this behavior had transmuted my life, where staying out past six p.m. and not going to class were considered crimes punishable by imprisonment.

I had been planning on going back to sleep after court. I was exhausted in that way only a teenager can be, when no amount of food or sleep is enough for a body.

With two other girls, I was shackled, a chain connecting our three bodies; six hands cuffed at the waists.

In 2001, a teenager imprisoned in a Texas boot camp had pneumonia and pleaded with guards to see a doctor when he couldn't breathe. He was forced to do pushups in his own vomit after the guards claimed the teen was faking it. After nine days of medical neglect, he died.

This is how we care for our children under the false rubric of rehabilitation.

A plastic bracelet was affixed to my wrist bearing the requisite identifiers.

Last name first, first name last.

We were only addressed by our last names in jail, which may be why, even now, I can't stand when people call me by only my last name.

Since no one brought me a different pair of prescription contacts, I was to serve my sentence of 30 days with one purple and one green eye. In jail, the heterochromia went unnoticed, or at least unremarked.

All the girls were housed in a single trailer at Central; a sea of chipped metal bunk beds crowded in a single room. One room for a hundred girls.

Menstruating females who live together in close proximity sometimes experience a synchronicity

in menstrual cycles.

One hundred girls sleeping together, bleeding together.

At dinner that first night of my incarceration, a tall girl, scanning me up and down, approached.

Haven't I seen you tricking on Sunset? she asked. I shook my head. Yeah, that was you, she insisted.

After three days at Central, my name and inmate number were called after breakfast one morning. I stood up and filed behind the growing line of girls. What's this line for? I asked the girl in front of me. *We're moving*, she whispered. *Where?* I asked. She shrugged. *Could be anywhere*.

I was the only Asian girl in the two facilities where I served my sentence.

When I was transferred to Sylmar, the communal trailer replaced by small concrete cells housing two prisoners, I met my cellmate, Alicia, who had a chunk of hair missing from her head. Her pimp had yanked it out of her head while he was high on crack in Venice.

She was fourteen.

Girls who are victims of sex trafficking are frequently arrested on prostitution charges. Instead of being treated as victims, they are criminalized as perpetrators.

When law enforcement treats girls as perpetrators, the cost is twofold: Their abusers are shielded from accountability and prosecution, and the trauma underlying the girls' behavior is unaddressed, resulting in a cycle of abuse, self-blame, and imprisonment.

Research reveals that girls who are sent into the juvenile justice system have typically experienced overwhelmingly high rates of sexual violence.

The paternalistic approach taken in dealing with delinquent girls is to detain them as a way to protect them.

Women, and thus girls, because it is the sphere of reproduction over which we still reign, must be colonized.

In detention, wearing the same uniforms and castoff state-issued shoes, we looked for ways to define ourselves, to write ourselves into existence. One way in which we did this was through the medications that we took.

For a girl on 3 milligrams of Risperidone was distinct from a girl on 50 milligrams of Depakote.

Analogous to all the restrictions that were placed on our bodies, one area in which we were allowed freedom was in the prescription drugs that we were allotted. Every girl was encouraged to take birth control pills and antidepressants. Many, and perhaps most of us, were on a daily mélange of varied medications.

Contraceptives, hormonal control over the female body's organs, anti-abortion and rape laws—female bodies are property over which we ourselves do not prevail.

Contracts with private and government companies serving carceral needs, from the food we ate to the clothes on our bodies, the medications that suffused through our bodies to the locks and fences that kept us inside, those who worked to indoctrinate and keep us in the judicial system—clerks, guards, probation officers, judges—to the chain-shackle manufacturers, "suicide-resistant" stainless steel toilets, the foam pads that we slept on and the maxi pads we used... we all know by now that this is a big business; all of it, every single constituent of the penal system is absolutely necessary for the containment of "dangerous" bodies.

Have I mentioned that the majority of incarcerated young girls are arrested for skipping school, running away, and staying out past curfew?

States spend approximately \$5.7 billion on the incarceration of children each year. The majority of children's offenses are nonviolent.

Lying on my bunk, I flipped through an old teen fashion magazine with the cover ripped off.

Girls are sexualized in our culture, sexually abused, punished, and criminalized for being subjects of this valorization, and then used as commodity for profit.

Prisoners and their families are cash cows, the customers needed to service the industry.

"The young girl becomes demonetized when she goes out of circulation. When she loses the possibility of reentering the marketplace, she begins to rot."

— *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, Tiqqun

Yet, in the eyes of the corporate state, in the context of the prison-industrial complex, she is already rotten, an abject body that only has value when it is caged.

Sixty percent of youth are returned to detention within three years of their release.

Hey, high recidivism rates are good for business!

After using the toilet and brushing our teeth in the morning, we lined up next to the bathroom troughs, a small square of wet towel slung over our shoulders, each girl waiting for her ration: a plastic spoonful of hair gel plopped into a cupped hand.

The industrial-sized green tub of hair gel, orbs of air trapped inside it like aspic, was delivered piecemeal. Our Communion, our holy Eucharist.

I never used hair gel on the outs, but, like the birth control and antidepressants, it was a luxury that I could not deny. So with my palmful of green gel, I walked back to my cell, sat crossed-legged on my thin plastic mattress, and smeared it in my hair from my hairline back to the crown of my head where my ponytail gathered.

By lunchtime, after paramilitary exercises including jumping jacks, pushups, and running through used tires, the hardened hair gel had begun to flake. Around my hairline, sweat reconstituted the dried hair gel and liquefied it, sticky streams running down my flushed red cheeks.

Girls who are criminals cannot foster empathy, because empathy is reserved for those whom the public can assimilate into an intelligible order, which excludes the violent, the guilty, the indigent, the besmirched, the criminal.

... And of course girls of color, who are imprisoned at disproportionate rates for non-serious offenses that are rooted in experiences of trauma and abuse.

"The liberal colorblind paradigm of racism submerges race beneath the 'commonsense' logic of crime and punishment. This effectively conceals racism because it is not considered racist to be against crime." — *Against Innocence*, Jackie Wang

One mysterious morning, sitting in our triple metal bunk beds at Central, we were each given an identical envelope, retrieved from a large plastic trash bag. Impatiently, we waited for our dole and permission to open the mail. Inside the white envelopes were Easter cards, written by children from a nearby private Catholic school.

Happy Easter, they read. May God bless you.

I guess it was Easter Sunday. I hadn't realized.

It was easier when time passed without meaning, when the days were self-contained, no seepage from that other life.

The anonymous benediction from one child to another, one an ambassador of God, the other a criminal—in other words, a non-human, an abject body, a piece of rotten meat. To this day, the month of April is still unbearable to me.

The transformation of bodies of color into consumers and producers of an immense range of commodities in the carceral system effectively transforms public funds into profit.

I discover a Yelp page for Sylmar Juvenile Hall. There are four entries.

The first entry by Judy W. begins, “I’ll be darned, a Yelp page for juvy...”

Judy was an inmate at Sylmar in 1966, a year after the facility opened.

In her Yelp review, Judy recalls that, at her foster mother’s urging, she asked to have a guitar brought into the facility. Surprisingly, the probation officers agreed.

She writes, “i got my guitar and sat in my door way and sang the whole song of Bob Dylan’s Chimes of Freedom to the other girls while they sat in their door ways. One verse says

Tolling for the searching ones
on their speechless seeking trail
For the lonesome hearted lovers
with too personal a tale
AND FOR EACH UNHARMFUL GENTLE SOUL
MISS-PLACED INSIDE A JAIL
we gazed upon the chimes of Freedom flashing”

Alicia and I slept, curled up on plastic mats on concrete floors, locked inside an airless room.

At night, we were allotted two minutes in the shower before we returned to our cells.

In the middle of the night, I awoke to Alicia crying. “I have to pee,” she said. There were no toilets in the cells, no sink, only wall-to-wall concrete and a tall window, painted over from the outside to obstruct sunlight from entering and to prevent us from being able to see outside.

After half an hour, an officer came out, not to see what was happening, not to let Alicia use the restroom, but to tell us, “Shut up or I’ll get the pepper spray.”

Defeated, Alicia squatted by the door and peed, her urine pooling up in our cell and flowing out into the hallway.

This got the guards’ attention. They finally unlocked our door. “Clean this up, you dirty pig,” they shouted.

For the next hour, she mopped the concrete floors while the rest of us girls lay in bed listening to the water sloshing in the mop pail and the crying of a fourteen-year-old girl who was missing a patch of hair from her head, who had sex for money, money that did not belong to her.

A body that did not belong to her.

Sylmar was a pre-boot camp facility, which meant that we had to adhere to paramilitary conduct.

This included memorizing the juvenile hall’s mantra, a combination of religious and bromidic military platitudes that purported to empower us through strict moral and work-related ethics with the help of God.

What power did we have over ourselves as incarcerated bodies? The power to get out of bed, to do our paramilitary exercises, and complete our assigned work? The truth was that if we did not perform these duties, we would have been cited for failure to comply and confined to our rooms all day with nothing to do but sleep or stare at the walls.

Being detained in a paramilitary-style correctional facility meant that we had to square our corners wherever we walked, whether it was to the toilet or to the breakfast table. So we marched with our torsos erect, making sharp ninety-degree turns when we wanted to change direction. This inevitably resulted in some girls endlessly turning in square corners, unable to figure out how to arrive at a destination that was aslant from where they stood.

Imagine a world where diagonal movement and curvature do not exist.

To square a corner, one must pivot on the ball of the turning foot while flinging the body in the chosen direction with the weight of the shoulders. When the body has pivoted ninety degrees from its original orientation, the other foot must land directly in front of the pivoting foot to stop the body's momentum from overreaching and exceeding the aforementioned degree of rotation.

In graduate school in California, on the way from my house in Highland Park to art school in Valencia, I would take back roads and outlying highways in order to avoid traffic.

Where the 210 and 5 highways meet, separated by a thin strip of packed desert earth and dry shrubs, stands the sand-colored building where I lived for nearly four weeks of my life at the age of sixteen.

The antiseptic bleach smell that permeated everything from the plastic mattress to the rows of toilets and the dining hall, the way I would drag the wet mop on the floor to make patterns like a windswept dune field, the greyed bras stamped with PROPERTY OF LOS ANGELES COUNTY fastened across our chests, the line we formed when our numbers were called, never knowing where we would go next.

In the morning and late at night after visiting writer lectures on campus, I drove through wildfires and floods with the windows down, the wide freeway spreading on all sides of me, merging at the turnoff for I-5, the sand-colored building always rising up from the sculpted desert earth to greet me, whether I was paying attention or not.

