



Incorrigible (Life Writing)

Velma Demerson

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On a May morning in 1939, eighteen-year-old Velma Demerson and her lover were having breakfast when two police officers arrived to take her away. Her crime was loving a Chinese man, a “crime” that was compounded by her pregnancy and subsequent mixed-race child. Sentenced to a home for wayward girls, Demerson was then transferred (along with forty-six other girls) to Toronto's Mercer Reformatory for Females. The girls were locked in their cells for twelve hours a day and required to work in the on-site laundry and factory. They also endured suspect medical examinations. When Demerson was finally released after ten months' incarceration weeks of solitary confinement, abusive medical treatments, and the state's apprehension of her child, her marriage to her lover resulted in the loss of her citizenship status.

This is the story of how Demerson, and so many other girls, were treated as criminals or mentally defective individuals, even though their worst crime might have been only their choice of lover. *Incorrigible* is a survivor's narrative. In a period that saw the rise of psychiatry, legislation against interracial marriage, and a populist movement that believed in eradicating disease and sin by improving the purity of Anglo-Saxon stock, Velma Demerson, like many young women, found herself confronted by powerful social forces. This is a history of some of those who fell through the cracks of the criminal code, told in a powerful first-person voice.

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