

Dear Kitty,

There's no one in the world I've told more about myself and my feelings than you, so I might as well tell you something about sexual matters too. Parents and people in general are very strange when it comes to this subject. Instead of telling their daughters as well as their sons everything when they are 12 years old, they send the children out of the room during such conversations and leave them to find things out for themselves. If the parents notice later on that the children have learned things anyway, then they assume that the children know either more or less than they actually do. Why don't they then try to make good the damage and find out what the position is? Grown-ups do come against an important obstacle, although I'm sure the obstacle is no more than a very small barrier, they believe that children will stop looking on marriage as something sacred and pure when it dawns on them that in most cases the purity is nothing more than eyewash.

Anne Frank's clear-eyed resistance to the Perfect Girl, like her criticism of the Perfect Wife and her observation of adults' sexual hypocrisy, is not in evidence, leaving us with the sense that she neither resisted nor questioned the very things she in fact resisted and questioned most fiercely. We were led to believe that the Perfect Girl—docile, accepting, and unquestioning—lived inside this complex, sexual young woman. It is the lie girls everywhere must contend with every day, a lie that trivializes them, silences their voices, and mutes their sexuality. It is a lie responsible for the question I asked myself again and again in this book: Why do women believe the Perfect Wife exists when they know she doesn't?

We have only to look to girls for the answer. Young girls, too, come to believe the Perfect Girl exists even when they *know* she doesn't, because adults, who have such a profound influence over them, act as though she

does. Adults make it clear that it is just such a girl who will grow up to become the lucky heroine of one of many romantic love stories girls already know by heart.

LOVE LESSONS FOR GIRLS

One after another of that beautiful silent creature, the Perfect Girl, the younger version of the Perfect Wife, fill the pages of the stories of love that in turn filled our childhood and now inhabit our unconscious. The jacket copy in front of me here calls one of them, Hans Christian Andersen's famous tale, "The Little Mermaid," a "timeless story of courage, sacrifice, and the triumph of unselfish love." Let me tell you that tale.

A beautiful fifteen-year-old mermaid spies a sixteen-year-old prince on a ship and instantly falls in love with him. A storm comes, wrecks the ship, and hurls the prince overboard. At first the Little Mermaid is overjoyed—he will be with her, in her own world; they will be together!—but she quickly realizes he can't survive in the water and that she must get him to shore, which she does.

She is miserable. How can they fall in love when he can't see her, doesn't know she rescued him, when they'll never meet again? She must be transformed into a woman, a human woman, to win his love. She consults the Sea Witch, who grants her her wish, but tells her that the division of her fish tail into human legs will feel as if a sharp sword is slashing through her (so much for even *considering* sex with the prince) and that pain will never go away. She will *look* glorious with those legs, will *appear* the essence of grace, but every step she takes from then on will be, for her, like walking on knives.

And should the Little Mermaid fail to win the love of

her prince—if he should marry someone else—her heart will break the very next morning, and she will turn immediately into seafoam. Fine, the Mermaid says. I'll do it.

As payment for her transformation, the Sea Witch exacts this price: She will cut out the mermaid's tongue. The girl will have her chance to win the prince, but in silence. And in pain. And with failure to marry him resulting in her death. But the mermaid is passionately in love, and agrees to these terms.

When she appears in human form in front of the prince, without a tongue and with those promised racking pains in her new legs, he marvels at her grace, is enchanted by this lovely girl who looks so much like the woman who saved him, the one woman he vows to love and marry. But he doesn't realize it *is* that woman. And the Little Mermaid can literally say nothing.

And so the prince meets a neighboring princess and is instantly lovestruck, believing her, not his speechless companion, to be the girl who saved his life. The Little Mermaid is enlisted to hold the bride's train at the wedding—mute, mutilated, heartbroken, and—as punishment for failing to win the prince—she must die later that evening.

It goes on. Briefly: If she will kill the prince, she can save her own life. She refuses, and therein lies the moral: Because the Little Mermaid is so good, so loving, so selfless, and so forgiving of the prince (who is living happily ever after with another woman he has mistaken for her) her life is not spared. "Of the one hundred fifty-six fairy tales Andersen wrote in his life, this story continues to be one of the most enchanting," the jacket copy concludes.

Who could be speaking that calls this tale of a heroine's muting and mutilation, of her pain and heartbreak and death "enchanting"? Whose criteria for pleasure are

those qualities I just named—goodness, selflessness, and forgiveness? Little girls who read "The Little Mermaid" read only a terrifying cautionary tale, and learn what seem to me five clear lessons about love, each one progressively less enchanting:

Love Lesson 1: To be chosen by a man requires a drastic transformation. You cannot be yourself and be loved.

Love Lesson 2: After your transformation, which will be agonizing and deforming, you can only hope the man for whom you went through so much trouble will be able to see who you *really* are, unaware as he is of how much of you has been altered for his benefit.

Love Lesson 3: If he doesn't recognize who he is seeing, or if he doesn't like what he sees, you are in danger of ceasing to exist.

Love Lesson 4: No matter what happens to you, you will be without vindictiveness and vengeance. You will be gracious, silent, selfless, and forgiving. And this will be called "good."

Love Lesson 5: This goodness—that is, your willingness to be silent and be maimed in order to win a man—will qualify you for the role of the Perfect Girl—later, the Perfect Wife.

GIVE UP SEX AND YOU CAN HAVE IT ALL

Not all tales of girls awaiting discovery by the prince end so unhappily. (Walt Disney's 1989 movie version of "The Little Mermaid" was spiffed up, probably so that soft-hearted viewers would not leave the theater in tears. Although the basic premise remains, Disney's interpretation satisfies all our happily-ever-after expectations: The Little Mermaid is never in pain, her voice comes

back in the end, and she, not the princess, marries the prince.) But happy ending or no, most fairy tales reinforce a similar unnatural image of the Perfect Girl. Transfixed as we are by the ordinary girl's transformation into someone worthy of being singled out by a prince, these magical tales about love confirm that what finally wins his love are her beauty and her chastity; her appropriateness and her silence; and of course her selflessness, her forgiveness of anyone who hurts her (including cruel stepsisters and wretched mothers and sea witches and other female characters whose role it usually is to introduce and enforce patriarchal laws, and to punish transgressors) and her astonishing lack of anger. While her desirability to the prince is evident, her sexuality is not: The Perfect Girl has already spent her passion in her ardor to win the prince's admiring gaze; by the time she is his, she is doomed to eternal sexlessness, unwittingly complicit in preparing for her own exit from the story just as married life begins.

The Cinderella story says much the same thing about the feminine ideal as the Little Mermaid's does: She, a charge girl, like the Mermaid, must be transformed in order to become a suitable mate for the prince, for personhood to be conferred on them as a result, and both girls await, after their transformation, the reward of male favor. The mermaid—more admirably assertive (she goes after her man, after all) loses; Cinderella wins. But both girls share one common trait: silence.

The girl who goes from rags to riches never actually *says* anything in the story about her wishes and her pleasure; rather, according to Louise Bernikow, author of *Among Women* (1980), "Cinderella stammers, unable to say what she wants—for she is passive, suffering and good . . ." and it is her fairy godmother who simply "divines Cinderella's desire . . ." to be dressed beauti-

fully, to go to the ball, to win the prince—as we divine it too. It seems unthinkable that Cinderella might not covet this scenario.

Nor does Cinderella ever express what she feels about anything else that happens to her, bad or good. Her voice, the one that might illuminate her own aspirations for love and for life, that might inform young readers about her own experience of desire for the prince, is missing. How was the ball? Was it thrilling to be the envy of those horrible sisters? What was the prince like? Sure, he's rich and handsome, but do you *like* him? Was he fun to dance with? Do you find him sexy? And about that pumpkin threat—doesn't that home-before-midnight admonition suggest that someone doesn't want you to *have sex*? "The object of her transformation is not actually *pleasure*," writes Bernikow, "but transportation to the ball with all the right equipment for captivating the Prince." And we as readers see her through *his* eyes, content not to know what she saw and felt and said. We fill in the blanks as reflexively and as confidently as her fairy godmother did, assured that the prince's pleasure is her pleasure. We supply a missing voice—but is it hers? We supply the conclusion, but what happens to her then?

No one says outright to women, *Give up your sexuality and you can have everything*, but these women learned in adolescence as surely as did Cinderella the threat posed to a nice girl who does not get home by the stroke of midnight: She will lose everything. Her gown will turn into rags; her coach into a *vegetable*. She will no longer be desirable. And what they felt as they became silent and sexless, as they assumed the qualities of the Perfect Wife, was rage and sadness and loss—just as girls do when they assume the qualities of the Perfect Girl. Seeing the girls in the women, in fact, gave me a

way of understanding something completely paradoxical, something which, on the face of it, makes no sense: Why would a vital, lively, sexual woman today give up that vitality, liveliness, and sexuality and aspire to become Donna Reed, a sexless, silent, grown-up version of the mute and mutilated Little Mermaid?

For the answer, it is back to the girls again. There are a few adolescents who say "No way," and decide to hang on to their inner authority, and to defy disconnection with themselves and others. They are determined to get what they want, not what they are led to believe they want—to hang on, in other words, to the inner voice that links them to their sexuality. Gilligan is, in fact, most interested in these girls, whom she calls resisters, because they spurn the notion of the Perfect Girl who has Perfect Relationships. These girls cannot be bought, she says, and must be supported in their courage and their resistance: They are the irrepressible, lively ones, the ones who manage to remain psychologically alive throughout adolescence—even if, as a result, they are called "bad."

Many of the wives I talked with were now-grown-up resisters, women who had made it through adolescence without succumbing to the idealized image of the Perfect Girl. They had had premarital sex at a time when it was no longer condemned. They were women who had held on to their voices, their authenticity, and their sexuality—up until marriage. Most had grown up influenced by new and overtly sexual icons like Madonna and Cher, role models that both supported them in their resistance to the Perfect Girl and in their recognition of and quest for sexual pleasure.

You would think, then, that these sexually sophis-

ticated women, immersed in a culture that seems on the surface more decadent than puritanical, that itself appears to have liberated women from any standard of goodness that prohibits sex and reveres silence, that provides, rather, models of forthright pleasure-seeking and verbal bluntness, would feel fortified in going their own way. You might imagine that these straightforward, liberated women would approach marriage differently from the way their mothers and grandmothers did.

But a funny thing happened even to them at this juncture where women's desires and culture once again intersect: At marriage, the lure of an idyllic relationship and of happily ever after was just as beguiling as it ever was. Entranced, the prospect of becoming the Perfect Wife, enclosed within Forever's safe walls, grew simply irresistible. Marriage appears to be the moment of capitulation to this antique standard of goodness, now as much as it ever was, even for the most defiant diehards.