

"Why do you think all of your feelings, all that experience that came before, is 'embarrassing' and 'stupid'?"

"If you could see what I wrote," she said, "you'd understand."

BURYING THE SEXUAL PAST

Many women had kept some kind of journal or diary of their lives before getting married—and many had got rid of them. But they, like June, found it hard to explain why. One reason given by a forty-year-old woman named Natalie was that

it seemed inappropriate to continue hiding something when there should be nothing to hide from my new husband.

But then, wondering about a logic that seemed to transfer the problem of what was being hidden to the object rather than to the contents, I ask Natalie: "If there is nothing to hide from your husband, why throw out the diaries? Aren't you in fact hiding nothing less than yourself?"

"I wouldn't know where to put the diaries."

"That's really it?" I ask. "There's no other reason?"

"I have a new life. I don't need these. Really. They would only cause trouble, I know it."

They were greeting a new life that would render irrelevant these old, tattered records of tumultuous feeling—an emotional history of premarital existence that was somehow no longer appropriate, was even humili-

ating. Janna, a thirty-three-year-old woman married four years, thought about it a long time before she called to say she still wasn't sure why she had thrown away her diaries—dating from the age of eleven—but thought perhaps it was because

hiding my diary was something I always did, first from my mother, then from my sisters. So there was no question of that, that they must be hidden. I'd put in every feeling I had every day, all my anger toward everyone; all my petty little crimes and thoughts. Then, when it got to be about boys, I began putting in sexual thoughts and recording all of that. I don't know why I didn't decide to just go on hiding them—but I became obsessed with the silliness of that. I was a grown woman. Where would I put them? "Darling, would you empty your desk drawers so I can have room for my diaries, which you can't see?" And then I figured they weren't of any use to me anymore; that they would just take up too much room in our apartment and for what? I think I felt I couldn't justify them—as if they were old stuffed animals or something.

Wendy, a twenty-eight-year-old married two years, said, "That chapter of my life is over"; other women echoed her perception that "over" meant "canceled." Most felt, in fact, that they'd probably "destroy the evidence" again. Wendy says,

I was *getting married*. It seemed right to get rid of them. In fact, my mother and I sat around and read them—we howled, because there were some incredibly intense letters from men I swear I can't remember—and then we—I—threw them in the fire. It was like a rite of passage, something women just do.

It was a rite of passage celebrating the occasion of becoming a bride, and of being transformed into a state

worthy of marriage. It was about becoming someone new and better—and, like a baptism or any religious restoration of innocence, erasing her whole sexual history served to "cleanse" her. It was not only justified but laudable, these women felt; an acknowledgment of a husband's possessive feelings for his wife. Freud wrote, in his 1918 essay, "The Taboo of Virginity,"

The demand that the girl shall bring with her into marriage with one man no memory of sexual relations with another is after all nothing but a logical consequence of the exclusive right of possession over a woman which is the essence of monogamy—it is but an extension of this monopoly on to the past.

How better to prepare for the marriage plot—the end of a woman's quest for love—than to jettison her memories, discard proof of her knowledge? How better to become Donna Reed than to obliterate all premarital sex—all badness—and to disdain extramarital sex, to superimpose on her psyche a model of sexual goodness that doesn't admit badness? And what else would make a woman give all this up—now, just as in Freud's day—but the promise of happily ever after?

Over the months we talked, many women slowly began to see the paradox of hiding themselves, when they had never done so before, for the sake of being in a good relationship. They began to question what such a concession signified. June, for instance, concluded that it was a disservice to herself and Russell to have thrown out all records of her sexual life. She questioned her decision and its finality, lamented that her past could never be excavated, and regretted her years-long reluctance to speak about or refer to it except in the vaguest, most dismissive way. "I really feel foolish. I would like

to read those old letters to Chloe; I'd like her to know who I was before I was her mommy."

THE PERFECT GIRL

It is not the first time these women attempted to subvert part of themselves in order to fit a more idealized version of femininity. They had done it once before, at the age of eleven or twelve, when they were right on the rim of womanhood, at that moment when girls are so often the happiest and the most themselves, the most straightforward, honest, and clear-sighted, when their world is filled with complicated relationships. At the edge of adolescence, though, says Harvard psychologist Carol Gilligan, girls suddenly start a process she calls revision, when they begin to cover over what they already know and feel as if "their feelings are groundless, their thoughts are about nothing real, what they experienced never happened, or at the time they could not understand it," and their formerly keen vision of life becomes dimmed. At the same time, they begin to devalue their own familiar, chattering, nattering relationships, feeling compelled to aspire to a less prosaic and more . . . perfect life, filled up with perfect relationships. Says Gilligan,

We speak with girls through this time and hear two things happen: What they know through experience—their own thoughts and feelings—suddenly loses authorization. And, relationships suddenly become idealized; they're suddenly wonderful, whereas up to that point girls know that relationships are intensely interesting, intensely painful, just joyous, absolutely awful . . . now, all of a sudden, relationships are wonderful. We begin to hear that breathy voice. . . .

It is at this moment that an outspoken preadolescent girl—"so resolute, so present at the age of eleven," says Gilligan, and so comfortable in her body and in the world, so able to negotiate and accept complex relationships with her parents and her friends, with boys and with her teachers, suddenly, in the space of no more than about a year, loses it all—the confidence, the deep connection with her own feelings and her simultaneous connection to her friends and family, the insistence on being straightforward and honest and outspoken, the irreverence, the humor, the firsthand knowledge that relationships are flawed and constantly in flux and that conflict and anger are as much a part of them as harmony is. She succumbs to a view of herself, of the world, and of who she should be that is unrealistic, and neither comes out of her own experience nor emerges from her own feelings: Gilligan notices that

girls draw attention to the disparity between an insider's view of life which they are privy to in childhood and an outsider's view, intimating that the insider's knowledge is in danger of being washed out or giving way. They're subjected to a kind of voice and ear training, designed to make it clear what voices people like to listen to in girls and what girls can say without being called, in today's vernacular, "stupid" or "rude." On a daily basis, girls receive lessons on what they can let out and what they must keep in if they do not want to be spoken about by others as mad or bad—or simply told they are wrong.

The voices that people like to listen to are clearly not their real voices, girls quickly conclude, just as the characteristics of the Perfect Wife are clearly not those the women I talked with felt they possessed. The voices of girls that people want to listen to, at this moment when their sexuality is blooming, are no voices at all.

In a three-year nationwide survey of 3000 adolescent girls and boys conducted in 1990 by the American Association of University Women (AAUW)—the largest study ever undertaken on the link between gender, self-esteem, and education—it is stated that only 15 percent of the girls will argue with their teachers when they think they are right, compared with nearly a third of the boys. Teachers call on girls less frequently than boys. They tend to evaluate boys' work on its academic merits, girls' on its neatness and orderliness. Only 29 percent of girls agree with the statement, "I am happy the way I am"—compared with 46 percent of teenage boys. In fact, in the middle school years, the percentage of girls who agree with the statement, "I like most things about myself" plummets almost fifteen points. With little confidence in themselves and their abilities, they come to value their looks as the most important measure of their self-worth—and only 16 percent of white middle school girls, 10 percent of Hispanic girls and 25 percent of girls of color like the way they look. For girls, the report concludes, the loss of self-esteem is far more dramatic than it is for boys, and "has the most long-lasting effect."

Up now against what Gilligan calls the wall of "Western culture," by which she means the patriarchy, girls suddenly see before them an unfamiliar new standard by which to judge themselves: They begin to see themselves through others' eyes and, thereby perceiving themselves as objects, not subjects, begin self-consciously to hide their real feelings and observations. They become silent, because to express the truth as they see and feel it, and not as they are *supposed* to see and feel it, will be interpreted as transgressive, seditious. They fear that their knowledge, if spoken, will endanger their relationships. They are hurled into the central dilemma of relationship:

"how to speak honestly and also stay in connection with others."

In her sudden desperate effort to be what others want her to be and not what feels best to her; and in her confusion about how to stay in relationship with them but at the same time stay true to herself, a girl is likely to buckle under, to censor herself in order to become more pleasing to others—and then finally to lose her clarity and her courage. The result of girls burying their knowledge, says psychologist Lyn Mikel Brown, a member of the Harvard Project on Women's Psychology, is "self-doubt, ambivalence, panic and loss." Such a disconnection is precisely what June experienced right after marriage, when she no longer was sure of what she felt and became "unconscious" of her own sexuality.

It is a process that obliges her to become silent and inauthentic—disconnected from her feelings—and ensures that she will become profoundly unsure, unable to function honestly any longer in the real relationships she only moments before thrived in. This is the moment when parents say, "*What happened? Only yesterday she was so confident!*" She is in a crisis. She gives up relationship, says Gilligan, for the sake of a Relationship.

Simultaneously, as if sent to torture her, the embodiment of this new ideal arrives, right there in her school classroom, forcing her to witness an unfamiliar idol—the Perfect Girl—who appears right out of nowhere. Seemingly sprung from the cover of *Seventeen*, she exudes the looks, gets the grades, and extracts the admiration of everyone around her. Silent and good, she is adored by the teachers and by boys, loathed by other girls for being so pleasing and so false. Unlike the girl who is naturally good, who happens to be beautiful and studious and popular but who is also lively and genuine, the Perfect Girl clearly becomes

good at her own expense. She has lost her vitality and seems out of contact. There's a lifelessness about her, as if her personality has been sapped in the interest of display. She realizes she fits an image and may even try to maintain it, but the role is as discomfiting to her as it is to her peers. She looks good but she doesn't feel good. Declared "it" as arbitrarily as if in a game of tag, she knows the honor is hers for reasons that have little to do with her real self.

With the entrance of this embodiment of a bizarre, frozen image of teenage goodness and erotic desirability, a spell is cast over the classroom: If our girl emulates it, she will lose the fluidity and authenticity of her own world and will become ever more withdrawn as she enters this stifling fake one. Her alternative is to be the kind of girl who rejects the ideal outright and refuses to believe in the reality of this saccharine creature and her false relationships and her stifled sexuality; the kind of girl who remains outspoken about what she sees and knows and feels. You know this girl: She wears a lot of makeup, maybe; she is overtly sexual; she ridicules phoniness and talks about it out loud; she dares to look and dress and speak and do precisely as she wishes. She doesn't care about the Perfect Girl. For not caring, though, and for not being pleasing; for her anger and her defiance, such a girl is called "bad."

But more than anything else, "bad" means *sexual*. The Perfect Girl, above all, is chaste. This, even more than her beauty and her compliance, is what makes her "perfect" in the first place. Virginity is the Perfect Girl's trademark. It is what allows her parents and her teachers to relax. A girl's sexuality *must* go underground if it is to be acceptable to teachers and parents, who are crucial in determining how she feels about herself. The AAUW children's study confirmed, in fact, that adults and adult

institutions—parents and schools—have a far greater impact on a girl's self-perception than do her peers.

GIRLS' SEXUALITY

Yet young girls observe, just as boys do, their own and each others' sexuality. They marvel at the maturing male body, they notice the minute changes in adolescent boys' chests and voices and groins, yet nothing but a boundless silence marks this fascination. Whereas men remember and talk and write about their sexual coming-of-age—Portnoy and Holden Caulfield will continue to tell their stories to generations of young men—women, obliged to mask what they felt, to hush what they saw, to register nothing but how they themselves appear to men—are rendered mute and dumb about their own erotic development. Where are the voices of these once-outspoken, intensely observant, passionate, and articulate girls expressing the first stirrings of their own sexual selves? Where are the young women—who are so acutely observant of the most minute changes, the subtlest nuances in each of their relationships—speaking out about their own sexual yearning, their own erotic attraction to boys, or to girls? What is written to declare a woman's sexual coming-of-age from *her* point of view? Where is the discourse of *her* desire, the story of *her* sexual curiosity, the expression of *her* pleasure?

Where, for that matter, is the dialogue between mothers and daughters about sexual pleasure—a dialogue that could create, in time, a genre of literature that would equal that genre created by men? Mothers will tell daughters to be careful, to watch out, to protect themselves, to stay "nice" girls; they will talk

about the mechanics of sex and about the results of careless sex. But daughters do not hear a great deal about sexual pleasure, from their mothers or anyone else—and how can silence beget anything but more silence? Girls learn no names for their sexual organs; they refer to their genitals as “down there.” With no expression of girls’ erotic feelings, no discourse of pleasure and desire passed from mother to daughter, no narratives of a girl’s coming into sexual awareness, there exists no language for them in which to speak about their own experience. And because they do not speak, it is easy to assume girls’ desire doesn’t exist—for why wouldn’t they say so, if it did?

We assume, then, that a girl’s erotic curiosity is minimal, that her experience of her own sexuality is nonexistent, and that pleasure is the last thing on her mind—odd, given that we *know* how much sexual feeling a woman has, *know* her physical and emotional capacity for sexual pleasure is monumental, potentially limitless. Odd too, given that women talk to *each other* about how powerful their submerged girlhood sexual feelings were, recall story after story about erotic feelings they had, games they played, fantasies they were lost in. But all this is subversive; it is a knowledge that is assumed not to be there, even as we know it is; a knowledge that women are supposed to be unaware of, that they are compelled to forget.

A girl’s real sexuality—that is, her own experience of it in her body—is thus replaced in the Perfect Girl by a construct, a calculation of the effect her behavior will have on boys and on her reputation. Then it is modified and presented so as to reassure others. Contrived to be neither “fast” nor “frigid,” fashioned to fit a culture that demands she look one way, behave another—that she *seem* sexy, but not *be* sexy—the Perfect Girl’s

sexuality is airbrushed bait: It exists solely to please. Later, it will be used to catch a man, to get love, to get married.

One famous girl whose story has pleased millions of us, and whom we believed to have been boldly forthright, is Anne Frank. Few readers of *The Diary of Anne Frank* knew until recently the extent of Anne’s revision—of her diary and of herself—how much even she succumbed to the image of the Perfect Girl—and how her capitulation would affect us forever after.

The diary of Anne Frank—the one we all know and love—was dramatically edited lest this extraordinary girl “who knew so much,” Gilligan writes, “would appear more perfect or more acceptable or more protected in the eyes of the world by seeming to know less than she knew.” Those entries in which Anne Frank originally presented what were absorbing emotional problems for her—her complicated relationship with her mother, for instance, and her engrossing sexuality—were edited out; canceled. Only in a version of Anne Frank’s diary called *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Critical Edition*, prepared by The Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation and published in 1989, do we see her true, unedited feelings—right on the page, adjacent to the earlier deleted passages, so we can compare them with what she first wrote. Only here is Anne Frank “permitted” to say what she knew, to speak out about what she actually spoke out about. Only then does she become the passionate, candid, moody, difficult, and brilliant real girl she was—the girl the women I talked with remember covering over or throwing out. In one previously deleted entry she writes:

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