

Tamara
Faith
Berger
Maidenhead

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‘The dream of all men is to meet little sluts who are innocent but ready for all forms of depravity – which is what, more or less, all teenage girls are.’

– Michel Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*

‘My mystery is that I have no mystery.’

– Clarice Lispector

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Teenage Girls

There are slaves on the earth right now, actual slaves. There are classes of slaves and races of slaves. There are slaves on the earth right now, birthing more slaves. This is not a dream. I have done a reality check and there are still slaves. I met two slaves when I was sixteen years old. I met them and they taught me that I had to change my life; I had to make it worth *worth*. I had to learn how to make my value instinctive because an instinct for value was all that slaves have.

At the edge of the sea in Key West on our family vacation – the March break time when I was sixteen – I learned that two hundred Africans died on the beach there after they’d made it on slave ships across. Then Cubans died one hundred years later, dried out to death on rotting wood rafts. Blond college girls also drowned in this ocean, after drunk sex that didn’t feel right. Key West: the last blot of American land before the slaves thrived or sank in the sea.

LEE: You know what this story is about? It’s the autobiography of your self-fucking-worth.

GAYL: Nah. She was just in a learning position. And then she led us like asses into the ocean. That's funny. She should start it like that.

§

On the first night of our family vacation, after greasy black burgers and fries near the beach, my dad and my brother took one bed with the TV remote and my sister took the other, screaming *Stop* when she saw scrubs. It was some hospital show, an operation gone wrong. I told my mom that I was going for a walk on the beach.

'It gets dark too quick in the tropics,' she said.

'If I can walk around after dinner at home by myself, why can't I do it here?'

My mother was slow with her comeback. 'But you don't know your way around Key West, am I right?'

'Yeah, but isn't that the point of travelling?' I countered.

My mother watched me as I scuttled around the room looking for the key, trying not to get the attention of my father away from the TV. I wasn't going to just lie there with them all and pretend to be involved in some hospital crisis. I'm not a herd mentality. People are out there having drinks and dancing. There's a beach outside our window, a moon.

I registered it was strange that my mother wasn't looking to my father for help like she usually did at home. The first flash of a fight between us and she'd shoot this helpless, fed-up look at my dad to get him to say something about me not listening to her. It was as if my mother knew that her words had no law.

The wind was loud outside through the screen and I put on my short jean jacket, in case. My mother had set herself up on the chair furthest from the TV with her headphones of folk and a book about women in Korea that had a black and white photo on the front.

Whatever, Mom, enjoy your dismal world. I'm in Key West. I'm actually here.

My feet had blisters from my new shoes but I couldn't walk down that hallway without running. Beer bottles rolled on trays outside rooms. The carpet was the colour of turf. Our motel was probably supposed to be nicer, maybe that's why my mother seemed so fucking upset. This was a Spring Break motel full of American kids.

I galloped down the stairs instead of taking the elevator and got out at the back, right near the beach. The air was kind of mouldy, still warm. A gull started to shriek. I didn't exactly know where to go. I thought it was weird there was no one around. I sat on the sand, in front of the hedges that guarded the pool. Fluorescent light through them made my skin green. The beach seemed like a sphere at night – out to each side it dropped into a hole. I thought about Jen on March Break in Cabo San Lucas with her mom and her mom's boyfriend. Jen wanted me to have a boyfriend so we could talk about things. She said that Josh was once begging her to do it with him, literally on his knees, because she was holding him off all week.

'You can really make a guy crazy,' Jen said, 'not letting them have sex with you. It's the hottest thing when they finally get it. It's primal, I swear, seriously.'

I didn't understand how she knew when to do it and when to hold off.

The ocean was black. I didn't want to go close to that void. I wanted to read. I was just going to get up and go back to our room when I saw a spark near the water. It was a cigarette being passed back and forth.

I inched forward on the sand. Over the waves I heard clicking, like magnets that you keep sticking together.

'I can't hold it anymore!' a girl said.

'Come on,' said a guy. He sounded annoyed.

Then that clicking sound got louder and I realized that it was sucking, then slurping.

'You can stop,' the guy said. 'Let's lie down.'

Then there was no light and there was no sound. After a few seconds, I heard something else. It was quiet at first, but then it squeaked, or meowed. I felt my heart being startled in time to those sounds. Painful, animal crying sounds.

It didn't feel good to be there. I crawled back to the hedges, sweating. I knew I had to go back to our room. I didn't want my mother to come looking for me.

That night, I had to tell myself a story to trick myself into sleeping.

Me still out on the sand by myself, smoking a spark. One of the guys in our Spring Break motel in bathing-suit shorts holding a flashlight on his balcony, circling it around. The light was drawing a heart in the air. Then his flashlight went off. He was coming down to find me. Me there meowing, slurping, on my hands and my knees. I had pulled up my skirt, put my head in the sand. I could still look behind me, squinting, I could look at the guy without him seeing my face. He was half-naked and hairless. He reached into his shorts. There were sparks off his body, flashlights, cigarettes. His shorts came down. He held himself. I was rocking back and forth. The guy crouched down near me, behind me, and twisted my head. I started to open. His mouth was tight like a trampoline. I was pinned but I wiggled my bum until the guy jerked and pushed up into me, somewhere. My stomach got prickly the way he was corkscrewing through. We were clicking, slurping. My father started wheezing. My sister dry-coughed. I turned on my side and tried to start again from the beginning.

I had to keep imagining that I was losing my virginity so one day it would really happen.

GAYL: Dreams, yeah, are dreams. That there was no dream.

LEE: Everyone was once a virgin, you know.

GAYL: You mean a *version* of a virgin. You could be raped a thousand times and still be a virgin.

LEE: Who the hell gets raped a thousand times?

GAYL: I'll leave that interrogative strand to the experts.

§

At the pool on the second day of our family vacation, my father said, 'I like your bathing suit, Myra, is it new?'

I nodded and then I jumped in the water. My suit was fuchsia, a combination of a one-piece and a bikini. My dad used to give me and Jody and Jeff dolphin rides in the water when we were kids. His back had pimples and you had to hold on tight with your straight arms to stop your mouth from going under. It was awkward before I knew how to swim. That feeling of going deeper, bobbing down but trying to stay up, while the dolphin didn't even know how close I was to staying under.

I wrapped my towel around me to cover myself. The sun smacked the surface of the pool.

'I'm going to the beach,' I said.

My dad had sunglasses on, his nose was bright red. Jeff was reading *Astro Boy* and Jody was tanning with baby oil. My mother pretended not to hear me. She was in the middle of her Korean book. It was called *Testimonies of the Comfort Women*. We hadn't spoken since the night before. I was almost finished *Cat's Eye*.

'Be back for dinneroo,' my dad said, his eyebrows going up and down.

I didn't want to pass by my mother on her lounge chair after making such a no-drama escape. I knew she loathed my dad's baby talk.

At the beach, college girls lay in groups on the sand around buckets of drinks, their bums curved up like fruits. Mine didn't do that. I had to pee. Guys whipped Frisbees over volleyball nets, noses as red as my dad's. I couldn't look at their bodies, jumping like dogs. My towel was a cape. I heard them laughing when I passed. There was this one guy near a pool-hiding hedge watching the game, with a walking stick. He had

muscular legs, bare feet and a stomach that I could see the sweat on. The guy stopped watching the game with the college boys when I passed. I thought he was maybe selling something even though he had nothing but that stick. This guy had short thick dreadlocks with beads on the bottom. He was black, flawless, shining. I walked for another few minutes on the beach until no one was around. I left my towel and book in a heap on the sand.

The sea was lukewarm; it didn't seem clean. I crouched down low in the water so my whole bathing suit was covered but I couldn't do it, I couldn't pee.

When I lay down on my towel I went on my stomach like the college girls. My bum was a grape. I was going to buy motorcycle sunglasses like theirs.

'Enjoying the sun?'

That black guy with the stick was suddenly beside me. He had on a rust-coloured bathing suit, two front strings hanging down untied. The walking stick was burnt and etched with triangle designs.

'What's your name?' the guy asked. He had some kind of accent. Jamaican, I thought, because of the dreadlocks. But it wasn't Jamaican, I knew that much too.

I thought that he was maybe going to ask me for money. I didn't have any money with me. I was hoping he wasn't going to ask me that.

'What's your name?' the guy asked again. He crouched down at the level of my face. His bathing suit had been wet. It was rumpled and sort of bulged in the middle.

I didn't feel the sun anymore. The hairs on his legs were little C's and S's. He smelled like toast right before it gets burnt. The hand on his thigh was bigger than my book.

'It's okay, girl. I am just asking your name.'

'Myra,' I said quickly.

This guy had a high, square forehead and a very big mouth. His eyes were moving, soft, the lids were kind of purple. He ran

his huge hand through his dreadlocks, then over his mouth. I felt so tired. A man had never been this close to me.

‘Can I sit with you? That okay? If you let me, okay?’

I nodded yes. I really had to pee.

The guy laid his walking stick down right in between us. Then he took something out of a pocket in the back of his bathing suit. It was a little clay animal, a turtle, palm-sized, with a graph carved into its shell. The guy looked at me and put it up to his mouth. I crossed my ankles and uncrossed them. Then, with two fingers the guy covered the holes on top of the turtle’s shell and started playing. He made one high note for a really long time. I rolled over onto my back. The guy began to play faster in time with his rapid breathing. His stomach started jiggling, his fingers were moving up and down like a tarantula. I turned my head to the side. I could see the guy’s face from underneath. Then the song ended with one long note as if the turtle in his mouth was moaning: *Here. Here. Heeeeeeeear.*

The guy looked down at me. He squeezed the turtle in his fist.

‘That was cool,’ I said quickly. ‘That thing is really, really cool.’

For some reason, I couldn’t sit back up or roll over. The guy was sweating even more. He reached for his walking stick and I thought he was going to leave. I really wanted to sit up but I couldn’t. I felt the curve of my back in the sand. I crossed my hands over my chest. I thought my bum might actually be like those college girls’, the way I felt it right now underneath me. It was stupid what I’d said, so stupid that I’d said his playing was cool. I wanted to just get up and go back to our motel but I had to pee so badly that I probably would’ve started to run and I didn’t want to run away from this guy. I didn’t want him to think I was scared.

I stared at the guy’s feet where some sand bugs were crawling. He looked like he had an extra knuckle in each toe – the big toe was the worst, cracked in the pattern of a star. I was feeling too hot, too stiff, getting burnt at my knees. The guy was staring at my lying-down body. He had his hand over his eyes to see me better.

‘Would you like to try this? Yeah?’

The guy laid the little clay animal on the crease between my thighs, right at the top. My ankles twisted around each other. I didn’t want the turtle to drop on the sand.

‘Come, come on. Try.’

The guy’s lips broke for his teeth, which were white on top, kind of yellow on the bottom. I finally sat up. The head of the turtle was dark, a little wet.

‘Put it at your mouth.’

I felt dizzy from lying down, from the sun. ‘If I blow on that thing, nothing’s going to come out.’ I laughed then and said sorry, even though I didn’t mean to. I was just hot. The sun was too hot.

‘It’s called an ocarina, okay. It’s got sacred sound. You put it at your mouth and blow.’

‘Okay ...’

‘Try it.’

‘No, it’s okay ...’

The ocarina was warm. I tried to give it back. But the guy put his hand on my hand, led it to my mouth. ‘Everyone can play music,’ he said.

Then he sat there watching me decide if I was going to blow. I felt my scalp sweat. I wished he hadn’t moved his hands from my hands.

‘Go ahead, go.’ The guy was stroking the sand with his fingers, raking it, making it deeper and dark.

My lower jaw moved around a little. I let my lips part and my tongue touched my teeth. The mouthpiece smelled like caramel. I finally put it in and tried to blow a bit. My first sound was like a twig being snapped. I tried to blow differently, harder, but it was nothing like when the guy had played it. I couldn’t make my sounds sound right. There was a sudden cramp in my gut and I stopped.

‘I told you I wouldn’t be able to play anything,’ I said. ‘Sorry.’

‘You weren’t bad at all. You have to give a first try, right?’

The guy winked at me. His eyes were glassy and big.

When I handed the ocarina back, my fingers touched his again. The guy held me there for a second. His tongue licked his lips. I looked down. I felt a smile in the middle of my throat. Is this how you really meet a guy?

Then, I think because I had to go to the bathroom so badly, I flopped back down on the sand on my back, pretending that I was getting some sun. I knew he was watching me, waiting for something. I put my arm over my eyes. I felt him stare in my bathing-suit holes. My armpit was a little nude crease that was opening.

'The sounds you made were sweet,' the guy said. 'You're just a little bit shy. You're a shy girl, it's okay.'

The sounds I made were not sweet, I knew that.

'Come now for a walk,' the guy said.

This guy maybe thought that I wasn't with my family on a family vacation. Maybe he thought that I was a college kid, that I was more than sixteen. I never thought I was shy, a shy girl. It was like he was waiting for me to say yes. To say yes as if I knew what I wanted.

'I understand. It's okay,' the guy said. 'I should leave you be.'

But he still didn't get up, even after he said that. He started pushing his finger towards me through the sand. I felt like I wanted to laugh. But I was squinting and licking my lips continually.

'Come? Yes?'

I was thinking: Girls get scared way too often. Girls get stupidly scared. I was not scared.

Telling myself not to be scared kind of worked.

I stood up at the same time as the guy. My stomach was bloated. I was holding it in. The guy had his walking stick in one hand and he covered his bathing-suit strings with the other. The turtle bulged in his back bathing-suit pocket. I held tightly on to my book.

This man likes me, and my family knows nothing about it.

About the Author



Tamara Faith Berger was born in Toronto. She wrote porn stories for a living and attempted to make dirty films before publishing her first book, *Lie with Me*, in 1999. In 2001, *The Way of the Whore (A Woman Alone at Night in the U.S.)*, her second book, was published. In 2004, *Lie with Me* was made into a film. *Maidenhead* is her third book.