

~~San~~ Thousand Oaks, CA:
Pine Forge Press. pp. 111-118

Fear of Falling: Sluts

Peggy Orenstein

There is only one label worse than "school-girl" at Weston, and that's her inverse, the fallen girl, or in student parlance, the slut. A "slut" is not merely a girl who "does it," but any girl who—through her clothes, her makeup, her hairstyle, or her speech—seems as if she *might*. Girls may protest the prudish connotations of "schoolgirl," but they fear the prurience of "slut": in order to find the middle ground between the two, a place from which they can function safely and with approval, girls have to monitor both their expressions of intelligence and their budding sexual desire. They must keep vigilant watch, over each other and over themselves.

The Danger of Desire

On a warm day, Evie DiLeo and I buy a couple of Cokes after school and walk to a park near downtown Weston. Evie is wearing a loose red T-shirt with a clavicle-high neck, blue-jean shorts, and broken-down huaraches. Her dark hair is in a ponytail, and when she smiles, she displays a mouthful of

braces with rubber bands that match her shirt. She'd like to wear sexier clothes, Evie tells me, regarding her current outfit with disapproval, but she had to battle her mother just to get to wear lipstick, and even then, she was the last among her friends to be allowed.

Evie is a fast-talking, matter-of-fact young woman, the daughter of a lawyer mother and a computer programmer father who have been divorced for eight years. Like Lindsay, she is enrolled in Weston's gifted program. Evie has a thoughtful, analytical gaze, and from our first meeting was unusually forthcoming in her observations. She rarely pauses before answering my questions, and follows every assertion with a deepening "because" clause. Sometimes she's so eager to get her opinions out that she doesn't wait to understand my question. Once, she told me she thought girls had an advantage: since more was expected of boys, they had to play by the rules, while girls could be more creative. Yes, I said, but boys still end up ahead. She nodded her head emphatically, said "Yeah," and then went on for a sentence or two before pausing and saying, "What do you mean by that?"

Although she frequently declares herself "a feminist" and "independent," Evie's self-confidence is held in check by the rules she is learning about female sexuality. She is keenly conscious of which girls at Weston are sluts, and she readily points them out to her friends and to me. Sometimes she does so casually, saying, "She's kind of a slut," when I

"Fear of Falling: Sluts" from *School Girls: Young Women, Self-Esteem and the Confidence Gap* (pp. 51-66) by P. Orenstein and the American Association of University Women, 1994. Copyright © 1994 by Peggy Orenstein and the American Association of University Women. Used by permission of Doubleday, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.

mention a particular girl I've been interviewing. Other times, she has grabbed my arm and pointed sluts out to me. I wonder, as the year progresses, whether her point isn't so much to help me distinguish the characteristics that comprise "slut" as to reassure herself of the safe distance between her and them.

Evie tells me she was in love with a boy named Bradley Davis all through sixth and seventh grade. When she described Bradley, it took a moment for me to place him. Bradley is not a boy an adult would take much notice of: average height, average grades, average looks. But Evie says she would've done anything to secure Bradley's affection and that, apparently, was what he hoped: starting in sixth grade, in math class, Bradley began asking Evie if she would have sex with him.

"At first I wanted to say 'yes,'" she admits. "I wanted to do it—I didn't know what it would feel like. It was sort of like a mystery, something that I wanted to know about. But then I thought, 'My dad would kill me,' so I just said 'no.' 'No, Bradley!' and he'd say, 'Why not?' I'd just say, 'No!'"

When Evie refused to relent, Bradley shut her out. He ignored her for the remainder of sixth grade and the first semester of seventh, although her own feelings remained strong. "He didn't talk to me, he didn't want to be around me, he didn't need me," she says bitterly. So when she regained Bradley's affections in the spring of seventh grade, and he propositioned her again, she knew the price of saying "no." This time, she says, "I said 'yes.' I was ready to do it. I was convinced I'd made a mistake and it would be all right this time. And I was just curious. I mean, why not?"

In truth, Evie didn't exactly say "yes" to Bradley; when he asked her over the phone if she would "have sex" with him she was silent, and both of them interpreted her silence as consent. "It was like I said 'yes,' because I didn't say 'no,'" she explains now. Bradley began to make plans: a date, a time, a place. But as the moment grew near, Evie began to

worry: what if she had sex with Bradley and then became a slut?

Evie begins to pick nervously at the grass where we sit.

"After I said 'yes,'" she says, "I started having these dreams about this friend of mine. She started having sex in sixth grade. This guy told her he loved her so she'd have sex with him, then he dropped her. Then he did the same thing again, and she'd run to him every time. Now she's in a special school for troublemakers.

"I had thought girls like that were bad and terrible and they didn't give it a second thought," she continues. "But now I feel like I understand what she was going through. I think you're more pulled into it. It's not like you just decide to have sex: it's like you don't have a choice. You're so emotionally torn, you just say, 'Do it, get it over with, nothing will happen.' But socially, mentally, physically, something does happen. You change. Even your hairstyle changes. That girl, she'd had her hair back and pinned up and a happy face. Then suddenly it was down and across her face, over her eye. She started dressing in tight clothes, a tank top pulled down so it's low in front and high in back—one of those cropped tops. She'd lay on the grass on her belly and put her chin on her hand so the guys could see her breasts. It was dramatic: her whole opinion of herself changed, and everyone else's opinion of her changed, too. The guy told all of the other guys and some of the girls knew. So everyone thought she was a slut and she thought so, too. *Her* life changed, but the guy, he's still in school. He's popular. It didn't damage his image, just hers. And he just forgot about her, used her until she left. In my dreams, that's what happens to me."

Just before their agreed-upon date, Bradley telephoned Evie to confirm their plans; this time, she made her feelings clear. "I said, 'No, Bradley.' And he said, 'No to what?' I said, 'No to *everything*.' He said his dad was coming and he hung up. Now he ignores me again."

Evie looks down at the ground when she finishes her story. Although the incident is over, it still haunts her. "I feel scummy," she says, softly, fluffing the grass with her fingers. "Even though I didn't actually do it, I feel like a total slut inside. I feel like a slut for considering it. It damaged my personality and my opinion of myself. And if people knew, nothing would happen to him, but it would damage the way *I* was treated. That transformation that happened to my friend would happen to me. Not the clothes—my parents wouldn't let me even look at a crop top—but inside. Inside, my attitude would change.

"I wish I could just forget it," she says, rolling over on her back. "It makes me feel so bad about myself. I'm ashamed of myself. I wish I could wipe the glass clean. Like if I had Windex for my soul."

Evie's story is typical of Weston girls' encounters with sex. It is the story of male aggression and female defense; it is the story of innuendo serving as consent; of a fixation, much too young, on intercourse as the fulcrum of sex; and it is a story, most of all, of shame. Evie's shame, articulated several times in our conversation, comes not from actually having sex, but from *thinking* about it: from admitting desire. At thirteen, just as she is awakening to her own sexuality, she has learned she must suppress it immediately; she has learned, in fact, to convert it into feelings of disgust, and to make girls who express sexuality into untouchables—"sluts." Evie knows that desire is dangerous: a girl who explores it, like the girl in her cautionary dream, forfeits respect, integrity, and intelligence. "I don't know why," Evie says during one conversation, "but usually the slut girls aren't very smart."

Sexual entitlement—a sense of autonomy over one's body and desires—is an essential component of a healthy adult self. Even Sigmund Freud, before yielding to the conventions of his time, once recognized the importance of voicing female desire. More recently, Germaine Greer wrote that women's

freedom is contingent on a positive definition of female sexuality. But the harsh either-or dichotomy imposed by "slut" precludes self-determination. Just as, at adolescence, girls learn to disconnect from their "bad" feelings, they must also disengage from their "bad" bodies. Quite suddenly, as Simone de Beauvoir has written, "it seems to [a girl] that she has been doubled; instead of coinciding exactly with herself, she now begins to exist *outside*." Evie's own mother, Margaret, has advocated the duality—for her daughter's own good—during what Evie calls "the sex talk." "Your body wants one thing and your mind says another and you'll always feel that way," Margaret told her. It is the girl, she warned, who is "in the driver's seat and she has to make the decisions and it's difficult because your body is telling you, 'Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes! I want to do this, it feels wonderful.'" But the conventional assumption, one that Evie believes, is that a boy cannot be expected to stop, so a girl must listen to her "mind" and say no.

It is difficult to consider allowing girls to unleash their sexuality. Like Evie's mother, many parents and educators believe that we protect our daughters by exacerbating their vulnerability, by instilling them with what we know are the perils of sex: the fears of victimization, of pregnancy, of disease. Those fears are, of course, all too real, but so is desire, and we do not teach girls that. We do not, as a culture, give girls clues as to how to navigate between the two toward a healthy, joyous eroticism, to what Audre Lorde has called "the *yes* within ourselves." Instead we consciously infuse girls with a sense of shame.

Boys have far fewer constraints. At Weston, girls may be "sluts," but boys are "players." Girls are "whores"; boys are "studs." Sex "ruins" girls; it enhances boys. In their youth, they may be snips and snails and puppy dogs' tails, but by adolescence, boys learn that they are "made of" nothing but desire, that, as Naomi Wolf has written, their "sexuality simply *is*": a natural force

that girls don't possess. Girls are, in fact, supposed to provide the moral inertia that (temporarily) slows that force. Just as in the classroom, just as in the family, girls' sexual behavior is seen as containable; boys' as inevitable. The Weston girls themselves participate in this dynamic, shunning sexually active girls, but excusing male behavior by saying, "Boys only think with their dicks." But what would ensue if we whispered the truth to girls, if we admitted that their desire could be as powerful as boys'?

In her groundbreaking work on girls' sexuality, psychologist Deborah Tolman points out that encouraging girls to disengage from their appetites not only does them a disservice but is an ineffective strategy for lowering the rates of teen pregnancy and transmission of disease. Banishing sexual feelings dissuades girls from considering the numerous ways *other* than intercourse in which they might explore their desire, ways that might be more appropriate, more fun, and certainly less risky to their health. Evie, for instance, does not suggest to Bradley that, at the age of twelve, they might want to try kissing or even touching before proceeding to intercourse; in the good girl/bad girl construct, sex to Evie means only one thing, "going all the way," and only a slut does it. What's more, Tolman notes that, although negative attitudes toward sexuality rarely deter sexual activity, they do discourage contraceptive use: responsible preparation for intercourse requires an active admission of desire, something girls have little incentive to make. In fact, if a girl fears that by saying "yes" she may subsequently become a pariah, consent itself becomes a murky issue. Evie, for instance, believes she said "yes" to Bradley, when, in fact, not a word was uttered. Absent a language of female desire, boys like Bradley learn that they may interpret silence and passivity (perhaps even "no") as consent. Sometimes it is; sometimes they intuit incorrectly, and sex becomes coercion or straight-out rape. Yet as long as girls feel they cannot say "yes," boys will con-

tinue—unwittingly and willfully—to misconstrue "no." As Tolman says, "I'm uncomfortable with this, but I know in my heart of hearts that 'no' cannot always mean 'no.' How can 'no' always mean 'no' if you're not allowed to say 'yes'?"

Sex Education: Don't Ask, Don't Tell

Desire and the dynamics of power embedded in it are rarely broached in sex education curricula, especially as it pertains to girls. Educator Michelle Fine has written that boys' desire is included in classrooms, intrinsic to the biological lessons of erections, ejaculation, and wet dreams. Girls' pleasure, however, is evaded, and their sexuality is discussed primarily through the veil of reproduction: the onset of menstruation, the identification of ovaries and the uterus. Desire, as it relates to girls, is reduced in most classrooms to one element: whether to say "yes" or "no"—not even to themselves, but to boys. By emphasizing refusal and ignoring desire, Fine argues, schools contribute to the repression of girls' sexual selves. The "official" version of sexuality that is taught, she says, becomes a discourse "based on the male in search of desire and the female in search of protection."

At Weston Middle School, as in many schools, the community dictates what children may or may not learn in sex education classes. Principal Andrea Murray estimates that 25 percent of the students at Weston are already sexually active. And if "sexually active" is measured solely by engaging in intercourse, that's probably about right: the average age of sexual initiation dropped steadily in the 1980s, and some studies have found that up to 53 percent of middle and junior high school students have had sexual intercourse at least once. If national statistics hold, one out of five of those sexually active girls at Weston will become pregnant before she graduates high school. Yet the sex education curriculum endorsed by the community for-

bids a discussion of contraception until tenth grade, precisely because of the fear that contraceptive knowledge will promote desire.

Maureen Webster, a young, maternal woman with a throaty voice, teaches the middle school's sex education course, which students take as seventh graders. During the course, she may not mention birth control in class—she is even prohibited from informing her students that condoms are a source of protection against HIV, lest the information in some way sanction homosexuality (activity which, free from the possibility of procreation, is necessarily based on desire).

"It's got to change," she tells me when I visit her classroom one day. "But right now some parents think that if you talk about contraception you're giving the kids a license." Ms. Webster says that if a student specifically asks about condoms, or some other taboo topic, she may answer the question, saying, for instance, "a condom is a sheath that fits over the penis," without revealing its purpose or in any way detailing its proper use. Essentially, though, if Weston's students want to know how to prevent unwanted pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases, she says, "they have to find it out elsewhere." Ms. Webster says that the Weston community even bristles at her clinical explanation of masturbation, an activity that provides plenty of entertainment without the side effects of either pregnancy or disease. "I try to answer as correctly as I can," she says, "but I know that the parents are concerned. So when some boy asks, 'How do girls masturbate?' I'll say, 'Just as boys can fondle their private areas, likewise a girl can,' and leave it at that."

The curriculum Ms. Webster uses includes a month's worth of lessons, but since the course falls within a larger, quarter-long health class, and time is limited, she usually condenses it into a week or two, which is still somewhat longer than most sex education classes. That leaves one class period each for male and female anatomy and one class period devoted to a lecture on how sexually

transmitted diseases are spread (but not how they can be prevented). Given both communal and temporal constraints, a useful discussion of sexual desire—or any talk of sexual activity that isn't grounded in "consequences"—would be unthinkable. Yet although issues of sexual entitlement are never overtly addressed in Ms. Webster's class, when the bell rings, the power dynamics of "slut" and "stud" are firmly in place.

Ms. Webster had invited me to visit on the fourth day of the sex education unit. The students have already zipped through male and female anatomy, which included a lecture on the female reproductive system but—because there wasn't time for the more comprehensive film Ms. Webster had planned to show—no identification of the clitoris or even the labia. Today, Ms. Webster is trying to illustrate the effect of sleeping with multiple partners on disease transmission. She has passed out a photocopied work sheet which summarizes the symptoms of eight STDs and now stands at the front of the room.

"We'll use a woman," she says, drawing the Greek symbol for woman on the blackboard. "Let's say she is infected, but she hasn't really noticed yet, so she has sex with three men."

Ms. Webster draws three symbols for man on the board, and as she does, a heavy-set boy in a Chicago Bulls cap stagewhispers, "What a slut," and the class titters.

"Okay," says Ms. Webster, who doesn't hear the comment. "Now the first guy has three sexual encounters in six months." She turns to draw three more women's signs, her back to the class, and several of the boys point at themselves proudly, striking exaggerated macho poses.

"The second guy was very active, he had intercourse with five women." As she turns to the diagram again, two boys stand and take bows.

"Now the third guy was smart—he didn't sleep with *anyone*." She draws a happy face and the boys point at each other derisively, mouthing, "You! You!"

During the entire diagramming process, the girls in the class remain silent.

This drama is played out without the teacher's noticing. She goes on to explain the remaining diseases, allotting several minutes to each and ten minutes to AIDS. When the bell rings, the students shove the handout into their backpacks. I doubt whether, in this short time, they've truly learned the risks of disease; but they certainly have been reminded of the rules of desire.

Objects of Desire

In late October, four sections of Weston's eighth-grade social studies classes are learning about the creation of history by making their own time capsules. Each student contributes a one-page description of an object that she or he thinks will best represent contemporary culture to people in the year 3000. Some of the essays are on neutral topics (since it's almost Halloween, Lindsay, for instance, writes about candy); others describe the scourges of our era, such as AIDS, violence, and drugs. Overwhelmingly, though, the boys in each class have chosen computers, CD players, VCRs, guns, and sports equipment to epitomize the twentieth century. The girls, meanwhile, have chosen clothing, hair-care products, and makeup. One girl even details which colors of which brands are appropriate for specific skin types: "Now for an example, I will tell you what colors will look good on a person such as me, fair complected," she writes, listing products for eyes, cheeks, and lips.

Whether their chosen objects are beneficial or destructive to society, in their essays boys are engaged by action: technology, sports, weapons, musical instruments. The girls take a more passive stance. Their message to the people of the future is that appearance supersedes all else. The symbols of the culture that are the most valuable to them are those that assist in the quest to please

others: the objects that will help girls themselves become perfect objects. In the language of the hidden curriculum, the time capsule essays show that, as much as girls repress desire, they embrace desirability. From an early age, girls learn to stand outside of themselves, to disconnect and evaluate themselves as others might. As they mature, then, the question they begin to ask themselves is not whether they *desire* (a notion they quickly suppress) but whether or not someone would desire *them*. The idea, as articulated in the time capsules, is to look sexy, but say "no"; to be feminine, but not sexual; to attract boys' desire, but never to respond to one's own.

When being desirable supplants desiring, sexual activity takes on a frightening dimension: it becomes an attempt to confirm one's self-worth, one's lovability, through someone else. This confused motive only intensifies the conundrum of the "slut": she earns her peers' contempt by engaging in the very activity she believes will bolster her self-respect. It may also, in part, explain why girls who have sex as young teenagers regret their decision at twice the rate of boys, and why, although sexually active girls have lower self-esteem than their nonactive counterparts, boys show no such difference.

Girls emphasize being lovable when they lose faith in their competence. Yet according to *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America*, girls' evaluation of their overall abilities drops sharply in adolescence: the young women surveyed were about half as likely as boys to cite their talents as "the thing I like most about myself," while they were twice as likely as boys to cite an aspect of their appearance. The biggest exception, again, comes among girls who continue to enjoy math and science. Without that fundamental faith in her ability, desirability becomes the central component of a girl's self-image; and the more she invests in her desirability, the more vulnerable she becomes to sexual manipulation.

Midnight Confessions

It turns out that Evie isn't the only one with a Bradley Davis story. In mid-October, Amy, Evie, their chum Becca, and a newer friend, Jennifer, attend a slumber party at another girl's house. In the middle of the night, after the prank phone calls, the pizza, the popcorn, and the séances, the girls dim the lights and their talk turns intimate and confessional. Evie confides the secret she's been carrying about her encounters with Bradley, and her friends do not condemn her as she feared. Instead, Amy and Jennifer—who have both had long-term crushes on Bradley—admit that he has approached them too.

After a rehearsal of a school play, Amy says, Bradley came into the area where she was changing. He approached her from behind and slid one hand languorously up her leg, lifting the hem of her slip. Then, he began to slide his other hand under her shirt toward her breast. "I didn't know what to do," she tells me later, "I just stood there. I couldn't even say anything. I didn't want him to do it, but it's like I couldn't talk. Finally I told him to go away and he did, and he didn't speak to me for the rest of the year. And he said that if I told anyone what he'd done, he'd ruin my reputation."

Jennifer is a small, nearly silent girl, the daughter of a Caucasian father and a Chinese American mother who are in the throes of a bitter divorce. Her hair is light brown and falls across one eye like a veil. She says that Bradley calls her when everyone else turns him down. Although she knows she shouldn't, she goes to his house and, as she puts it, lets him "do things to me," which she doesn't enjoy much but thinks will keep his affection. Once, she says, "he put his hand up my shirt, and I said 'no,' but he kept doing it and I was too afraid to stop him because I liked him so much and I wanted him to like me. I thought it would make him like me more if I let him."

Evie and Amy have been "best friends" since sixth grade, but because both have been attracted to Bradley, there has been an undercurrent of jealousy in their relationship. They occasionally spread gossip about each other, or pass cruel notes; more than once during the year they refuse to speak to one another because of conflicts over boys. But that night, their disclosures brought them closer together. They hugged and cried when they finished their tales, and they hugged Jennifer, too, because, as Amy later said, "we all felt so used." They swore to one another that they were through with Bradley, and vowed to engage in a sort of conspiracy of silence: they will neither confront Bradley nor tell anyone else (even other girls whom he's pursuing) about their experiences with him. The fear of the fallen girl is so strong that every time I ask the girls, individually or together, why they don't challenge Bradley, they react violently: they can't, they say, because, even though they refused him, *their* reputations, not his, are in jeopardy. "The thing is, we don't have control," Evie explains. "He could just say we were asking for it or that we wanted it. Then everyone will think we're sluts."

The girls aren't just guarding their reputations. Secretly, they're also hedging their bets: since, to varying degrees, male approval determines their self-esteem, none of them is willing to destroy the possibility of a future relationship with Bradley. Later, when we're alone, Amy adds, "I don't know. I still like him." She holds her thumb and forefinger apart, indicating that her feelings are still there, a little bit. "He's really nice when you know him; he's got a cute personality. I can't help it, I still sort of love him."

A few days after her friends' slumber party confessions, Evie and I walk to the park again. The days are beginning to shorten, and it's almost dusk as we settle in to talk. A beat-up brown Camaro pulls up to the curb, some thirty feet away, and continues along at

a crawl. The two young men inside, half hidden in shadows, laugh loudly, but we don't turn. Then one yells, "Fucking cunts!" and the car peels out.

"Gross," Evie says, staring blankly after them.

Evie informs me that, since the slumber party, she has made a decision: she is going to remain a virgin until marriage. Sex and what she calls "guys' hormones" are just too volatile, too much "can happen." Yet even with that brave thought, Evie cannot fully insulate herself against desire. Immediately after making her announcement, she adds, "Bradley asked me to have sex with him

again. This time I left it at a maybe. I don't know why, I feel ashamed of it. I kept the most control I have so far, but eventually"—she lowers her voice in a husky imitation of Bradley's—"he got into my head and I just said what he wanted me to say." She pauses, and her voice returns to its customary timbre. "He just starts talking, I can't explain it, and your face starts getting hot and you just don't think about what you're saying anymore. My hands start shaking . . . it really bugs me, but I can't stop it. It's not like you're even thinking you should say 'no'; you just automatically say 'yes.' "