

Virgin Stories

(Take Back The Night keynote address, University of Delaware, April 28, 2005)

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for Laura, Danya, Roxane, Daphne, Bear, Heather, and Erin

Let me tell you some stories.

Let me tell you some stories about virgins.

For the past few years of my life, I have been writing a book about virgins, about virginity, about the history of these things in our culture and our world. You might think that this means that I have been spending a lot of time writing about purity and about innocence, about girls and women who are exalted for being "good girls" and doing all the things they should. You might wonder why I would bring up the subject of virgins and virginity at a Take Back The Night rally—what on earth could virginity have to do with this?

Well. Let me tell you.

The book of Deuteronomy, one of the books of the Torah which is also known as the Old Testament, was written somewhere near what we now call Israel, sometime around the seventh century BCE. In the twenty-second chapter, it says that if a man takes a wife, and goes in to her to consummate the marriage, "and hates her, and speaks libelous words against her, and calls her by evil names, and says, 'I took this woman as a wife

and when I went to her as a husband I found her not to be a virgin,' then shall the girl's father and mother bring forth the tokens of the girl's virginity unto the elders of the city, at the city gate."

These "tokens" were spots of blood on a cloth, like a sheet or an undergarment. This girl, this daughter, had to bleed for her husband. It did not matter *why* she might not bleed. It did not matter if it might perhaps be normal for her, or for any woman, not to bleed. A woman's blood, you see, was not optional. Because if these tokens "were not found, then they will bring the girl to the gate of her father's household and the men of her city will stone her to death." Crushing a woman's skull, her ribs, her womb, her heart beneath a pile of rocks hurled by angry men, the Bible tells us, is how "you will cast evil away from you." A woman's blood, you see, is not optional.

Move the view a few hundred miles west and north. Fast forward a little bit to the time of the great archon Solon, the man renowned for justice and known as "the Law-Giver," in the sixth century before the common era. In Athens, any citizen who was father to a daughter and who believed that his unmarried daughter was no longer a virgin was forced, by law, to sell his daughter into slavery. It was the single instance in Solon's entire legal code in which a freeborn Athenian could be made a slave.

Pan just slightly south. A ferry ride away, in Crete, a man who raped a female household serf would be fined two staters if the serf had been a virgin, but only one obol if she had not been. At twelve obols to the stater, this meant that raping a woman who had been a virgin was twenty-four times worse than raping a woman who had already had sex. The fines were payable to the owner of the household. The women who had been raped got nothing except raped.

Pause.

These are virgins we're talking about. The untouched, the innocent, the pure. These are the "good girls."

Nothing bad can happen to a good girl. If you are a good girl, you will be safe, and people will like you. If you are a good girl, the gods will smile upon you.

If you are a good girl, you live happily ever after.

Pause.

Fast-forward. Shift westward again, then south. The scene is Egypt, around 200 years into the common era. A man, a Christian and a scholar, is writing at his desk, describing a quality he called *mulieritas*, literally translated as woman-ness. "*A qua potuerunt filiae hominum concupiscentiam sui adducere,*" he writes, "when daughters of men can induce desire," they are no longer girls but women. In another text this man, Septimus Tertullian, writes that "a virgin ceases to be a virgin from the time it is possible for her not to be one," that even being looked at in a sexual way was sufficient to ruin a woman's virtue and destroy her purity.

Go north, and north again, and west. Fast-forward. The year is 870, the place is Scotland, and the Vikings are on their way. The only thing that traveled more swiftly than the barbarian raiders was the news that they were on their way. Ebba the Younger,

the mother superior of Coldingham Abbey, gathered her sisters together to warn them that the invaders were coming and that it was likely that the convent would be stormed and the nuns raped. Taking a knife, Ebba cut off her nose and upper lip to make a bloody spectacle, a fearsome and hellish vision with which to repel the rapists. One by one, the other nuns followed suit, fearlessly carving into their own tender flesh in the hope that their voluntary blood sacrifice would forestall one they felt was far, far worse. The Vikings, or so the story goes, took one look at the horrific faces of Ebba and her nuns and burned the convent to the ground. Ebba and her sisters died mutilated, but they died virgins. The Church assures us that they found an instant place in Heaven for their martyrdom.

Pause.

These are virgins. Good girls. Good girls go to Heaven.

If they never get looked at sexually. If they never, ever induce lust in other people. For any reason.

If they cut off their noses to spite their faces.

If they are willing to accept that the price of not being sexually violated is to be burned alive.

Good girls go to Heaven.

Pause.

Fast forward three hundred years or so, and go south to England. "Go ahead," say the parents of a young noblewoman named Christina to the politically powerful and notoriously lecherous Ranulf Flambard, "do whatever you please with her." Flambard did not succeed in either seducing or raping Christina, who had taken a personal vow to remain a virgin. Christina's parents tried getting her drunk. It didn't work either. Finally they simply arranged a marriage and forced her into it. On her wedding night, Christina convinced her new husband, Burthred, to accept a chaste marriage so that she would not have to break her vow. Christina's parents told Burthred to rape her if he had to, and if he wasn't man enough, they'd help. Christina escaped and went underground for several years, hiding from her family and the law until she was finally released from her marriage and allowed to become a nun.

Fast-forward again. Across the Channel, south to Italy, the 1400s. The virgins of the convents, writes Dominican monk Bernardino of Siena, are "the scum and vomit of the world."

In Pisa a hundred years later (1544), world-famous anatomist Andreas Vesalius prepares to perform public dissections of the bodies of two nameless virgins for the purpose of attempting to find the hymen. One corpse is that of a nun, stolen from the hospital where she died by Vesalius' patron, Cosimo de Medici. The other is that of a seventeen year old hunchbacked girl, stolen from the city's public cemetery by medical students who, like Vesalius, assumed that she would be a virgin because, being a hunchback, "no one had ever wanted her." Vesalius discovered the hymen. No one knows the names of the women whose hymens he "discovered."

Pause.

Her parents would have preferred to see her raped than to allow her to choose for herself that she would not have sex. To have an alternative she had to run away, renounce her family, her possessions, and her home. She had to hide for years.

Being a good girl means praying hard and having high standards for yourself. Being a good girl means being above suspicion. It means sticking to your guns and fighting hard for what you believe in. It means having a good name.

You know. Like "scum" or "vomit."

They were discovered to still have hymens when their bodies were stolen and sliced up with knives. This is how we know they were good girls. Their names weren't important.

What's in a name, anyway?

Pause.

Across the ocean. Massachusetts Bay Colony, 1642. A man of the colony, a Puritan in good standing, sexually molests three little girls, all of them under the age of ten. In response, the governors of the colony institute North America's first age of consent law. The age of consent to sexual acts is, following the model of British common law of the time, set at ten years for girls. The man is permitted to repent to his neighbors and their God, and is reintegrated into the church and community. The extant records do not say what happened to the three little girls.

Back to Europe, to Paris, 1724. A churchman, the Abbe Claudius Nicholas des Rues, is convicted of having raped 133 virgins. Within two years the story of his crimes and his trial is available in book form in Venice, Berlin, Brussels, and London, all those raped virgins trapped in the pages and selling like hotcakes. No one knows what happened to the 133 women the Abbe raped. No one seemed to care.

Once more across the Channel. 1885, London, journalist William T. Stead, the editor of the newspaper *The Pall Mall Gazette*, blackmails a reformed procuress out of retirement and has her assist him in arranging to purchase a thirteen-year-old virgin girl named Eliza Armstrong for five pounds sterling. Armstrong is taken to a midwife and forced to undergo a genital examination to make sure she is still a virgin, then taken to a brothel and drugged to sleep. Afterwards, Stead takes her to a physician to have her examined again, to prove that he took no liberties with the girl. Then the girl was shipped off to France without the knowledge or consent of her parents and kept there with no contact with her family or friends, no knowledge of whether she would ever see home again. Meanwhile, Stead published an expose on the British sex trade in virginity in his newspaper. He called it "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon." In it, he gave Eliza the pseudonym of "Lily" and described her purchase, her forced examination, her drugging in the brothel as a primary illustration of the evil machine in which virgins were sold to rich men to satisfy their perversions. But he never described his own part in "Lily's" purchase or presumed "ruin."

Afterward, Stead was convicted of trafficking in underaged prostitutes under the terms of the law he staged the whole thing to support, a law which raised the age of consent in England from thirteen to sixteen, where it remains today. Disgruntled, Stead maintained

that Eliza Armstrong had, I quote, "experienced not the slightest inconvenience." W. T. Stead became a hero of the anti-prostitution movement, wearing his prison stripes in a grandstanding yearly reenactment of his unjust conviction, until he went down aboard the *Titanic* in 1911. Eliza Armstrong vanished once she was returned to her family. Nobody seems to know what became of her.

Pause.

Laws exist to protect the innocent and punish the guilty. This is what we are told.

Virtue is its own reward. They tell us that, too.

But who reaps the reward? Who disappears?

Pause.

A Glasgow courtroom, 1913. His Majesty's Prison Surgeon Dr. James Devon takes the witness stand. "There is a curiously persistent and widespread belief," Dr. Devon explains, "that a man who suffers from venereal disease can get rid of it by having connection with a virgin. I have been surprised at discovering the existence of this belief in people generally well informed as well as among the comparatively illiterate. I have tried to find evidence for the theory that it is a belief traceable to certain districts but I have discovered it among people of different places and of different occupations—so different that now I should scarcely be surprised to come across it anywhere."

Gauteng Province, South Africa, 2005. University of South Africa surveys reveal that as many as 32% of people surveyed in the country's capital believe that having sex with a virgin will cure a man of AIDS. The BBC estimates that a South African girl has a better chance of being raped than she does of learning how to read.

Heathrow Airport, London, the 1970s. Women of East Asian origin coming into England and announcing that the purpose of their journey is to migrate to England to marry are subjected to mandatory gynecological examination by British authorities. The purpose: to establish whether the women are virgins, and thus telling the truth about their marriage plans. Women whom the doctors decide do not appear to be virgins are suspected of entering the country in order to commit immigration fraud.

January 21st, 2002 Stockholm, Sweden. Twenty-six-year-old Fahidme Sahindal is shot to death by her father. Fahidme's crime: refusing an arranged marriage and choosing a Swedish lover. Fahidme's boyfriend also died, a few months before she did, in a suspicious car crash.

October 12, 2002. London, England. Sixteen-year-old Heshu Yones is stabbed to death and her throat slit by her father. Heshu's crime: having a Christian boyfriend whom Yones' father assumed had, or soon would, compromise her virginity.

November 26, 2004. Birmingham, Alabama, the United States of America. Twelve-year old Jasmine Archie is murdered by her mother, forced to drink bleach and then suffocated by having her mother sit on her chest until she died. Jasmine's crime: her mother believed that she had lost her virginity.

Pause.

Men get sick. Virgins get raped.

Virginity exams are made forcible, used as a lie detector test. Shut up. Lie still. Spread your legs. Let the doctors judge you. If you are a good girl, we will trust that you are not here to break the law.

If you are a good girl, we will trust you.

If. Never forget who sets those standards. Never forget who makes those rules.

None of us is good enough to be trusted with our own sex, our own self.

It is easier to kill us than it is to trust us. It is easier to kill us than to let us decide for ourselves.

Listen.

Listen to what these virgins are saying.

Being good girls did not protect us.

Being virgins did not save us.

Living beyond suspicion did not keep us out of harm.

Listen hard. This is a hard lesson.

We like to think that we are good, upstanding, right-thinking people. We have values, we have ethics, we care. We like to think that this is, somehow, enough.

When our virtue cannot save us, we cannot afford to be merely virtuous.

When virtue cannot save us, there is nothing left to do but fight, fight hard, and then keep fighting.

The night we have to take back is not like ordinary night, where we can count on the sun to rise and fill the world with light. Tonight and every night, today and every day, each and every one of us must be what brings the light and the heat.

So. Since I am someone who does her best fighting with words, let me give you some words to fight with, to carry inside you, to bring the light with.

No Pity.

When we pity someone, we make them an object of our pity. No one who has already been made the object of violence needs to have that object-ness reinforced. Don't make other people the object of your pity. Give them your help and your care.

No Shame.

There is no shame in surviving the forces that try to obliterate us. There is no shame in being someone who was the object of an attempt at obliteration. It doesn't matter who you are. Whore or virgin, old or young, male or female or intersex, transgendered or comfortable with your birth gender, straight or queer, if your vulnerable human self is made the target of abuse and violence, survival is the first, best victory. The shame belongs to those who have behaved shamefully. The shame belongs to those who misuse their power.

No Silence.

Speak for the dead, speak for the living, speak for yourself, speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. But speak. And speak LOUD. If your virtue and your values can't save you, you had better believe that your silence won't either.

No Excuses.

When we make excuses for those who perpetrate harm, we implicate ourselves in the harm they create. We do seek to understand the forces that lead people to cause harm, but comprehension is not an excuse. Objectivity is not the same thing as neutrality. Where wrong has been done, we are ethically bound to bear witness.

No More.

This is the goal, the point, the object of the game: a world in which all this violence is no more. Not just reduced, not just handled better when it happens. No. More.

No Pity. No Shame. No Silence. No Excuses. No More.

Say them with me:

No Pity. We will not make the wounded the objects of pity. We will give them help to heal.

No Shame. We will hold our heads high, and looking the world in the eye, announce the victory of survival.

No Silence. We reach out, across time and pain, with words, just anger, and witness.

No Excuses. We do not excuse, we do not make allowances, we do not condone what is wrong.

And for all of us, for Jasmine Archie and Heshu Yones and Fahidme Sahindal, for Eliza Armstrong and Christina of Markyate and Ebba the Younger, for daughters sold into slavery by their fathers and stoned to death by their neighbors, for each and every one of us who has borne the wounds of incest, rape, molestation, harrassment, abuse, neglect, coercion, violence, humiliation, whatever it may be, we say: **NO MORE.**