

Kelly Cooper

Not the First

This book you've given me, this how-to book, perhaps a joke, perhaps not, is by no means the first such book I've ever read. The first was called Sexology. Puritan Publishing Company. 1904. I found it lying in plain view, on the floor of my great-grandparents' abandoned farmhouse, its dull green cover marked by the white droppings of sparrows that flew in through gaps in broken window glass. Hid it beneath my coat so no one would see.

I never knew my great-grandparents. They were dead before I was born. There is one photograph. An unsmiling, already old woman in a strange and shapeless knitted cap. A man, skin dark from weather, a white shirt buttoned tightly at his throat. There are stories about one room shacks and eighteen hour days and six cows milked before breakfast. What use would they have had for a book like this?

Of course, they were doing it, I know that, everyone knows that. All of them, even then. Great-grandparents, grandparents, parents. Nothing to wonder about. The mystery is a tired man bent over a book in a cold dark room, his lips moving to sound out the word Libertine. A woman lying awake, forearms aching from the twice-a-day pull of cows' teats, waiting behind a makeshift curtain for the man to come to bed. The mystery is the reading.

The book is a study in euphemism. I have it still, read it for words like Onanism, Thralldom and Conjugal. It has no pictures. It has theories, some strange and unproved, some not. A passage reads, "Nature has decreed that the act of reproduction shall be expensive to the individual, so she surrounds it, in all cases, with something more or less of danger." Unequivocal. That much, at least, made clear.

Make no mistake. Yours are not the first love letters I've received. When I was in sixth grade, a boy sent me notes. A dirty-faced boy with eyes that glittered blue as sun on water. He wrote, "who do you love? I love you" and signed with Xs or with Os. Sometimes with both. I read these in the small cubicles of the girls' bathroom, with two friends who advised me. Write back, they said, his eyelashes are long and curly. Three of us jammed into the tiny space. Bodies touching here and there. Breathing down each others' necks. Closer to each other than we'd ever yet been to boys. Air sweet with wild strawberry. Lip gloss whispers.

I didn't know how to sign. Did not want my reply to give him bold ideas. Did not really want to write to him at all but urged by my friends, I printed small questions in reply, "What is your favourite colour? Who is the prettiest girl in grade six?" More for their approval than for his. Then the closing. X? O? I could not keep straight which meant hug and which meant kiss. Even if I had known, the decision was not easy. A kiss could be a disembodied touch of lips to lips, like children give old women who are familiar to the family. Or it could be something else. Foreign. French. A hug could be more like just friends, but it meant a sort of full-length touching. Bodies touching. Didn't know. Did not want to let on to my friends. Wrote back to the boy and signed both. The start of giving too much away, as usual.

I thought I had hidden the notes in undiscoverable places, but my mother found them. We need to have a little talk, is what she said. The birds and the bees, my mother called it. Vague intimations of flutters in the stomach and lower. I thought I knew how I'd been made. Life shimmered, transparent as insect wings.

Yours is very nice, don't get me wrong, but I've seen others like it. Its shape and weight are not as unique as you assume. Don't be misled by blushes or averted eyes. A woman's cheeks grow red for many reasons. One time, a boy exposed himself to me on the school bus. I'd known him all my life. Not the blue-eyed boy. Another. He tried to lay hands on me at every opportunity. Hands I liked, but would not admit to. A date was what I wanted. Not

that kind of girl, I led him to believe, but it wasn't virtue. Didn't know. Again. After the hands, what then? One day I turned in my seat, turned my back against him until he called my name. I love you, he said and when I turned to face him, he grabbed my hand. Forced it down to where he was unzipped. Felt smooth. Surprised by how smooth. And such an odd colour. Soft purple like the mark left by grapes crushed against a white cloth. There, he said. There. You won't have to see another one of those until you're married. And he never asked me. Him, I loved. I'd have marked his skin with slow Xs, if I'd known then what I know now.

Not long after, I overheard my parents talking about the neighbour's baby girl. An accident, they called her. Puzzled me. I knew the strength required for the boy to move my hand, just my hand, to that part of him. Yet it seemed the act could be performed without volition. Like bees can't help returning to the hive. Happening perhaps in sleep. A vivid dream.

The author of Sexology (a man with a splendid moustache and a high, starched collar, Wm. H. Walling, A.M., M.D.) advises readers, "remember that a woman has her capacity for sexual enjoyment, and most, if not all, have a tender spot for a child and a perfectly natural desire to become a mother." True, in my case. There are children I have wanted. Not yours. Not yet. When I was in college, I fell in love with the lab assistant. Biology lab. Yes, I do. I do recognize the irony. Admired him bent over a microscope. Legs were magnificent. He'd played soccer in every province in Canada. Had played in Europe. He was older. Bearded. Experienced. A woman is safe from pregnancy, he claimed, as long as she doesn't climax. So I fought pleasure. Imagined myself a stone. A brittle skin of ice over water. Didn't help. Didn't work. How do you know it's mine? he asked. The trophy was on his desk. A man, gilt-coloured, his leg extended to kick a ball, balanced on a heavy marble base. I swung it hard. He moved quickly, shifted so the trophy missed his head, which is why he is alive, why he lives on today and will continue to live without thinking of me very often, until the arthritis creeps through his body and settles in the once-cracked collarbone. His wife will rub his shoulders and ask sympathetically, what is the matter? And he will say, nothing, just an old injury from my sporting days. Not a complete lie.

And then there wasn't one after all. No baby. Thirty percent of women miscarry. Natural and unexplained in most cases. Like an abandoned hive. Unused honeycomb of cells for no reason. Nature numbers things in trillions. I was not alone. Not completely.

Wm. H. Walling's eyes are kind and rather sad. Perhaps he expects no one to listen when he recommends marriage as a remedy against debauch. Perhaps he suffers from his own advice, "The rule should be for the one who loves the most to measure his ardour by that of the one who loves the least." Maybe, like you, he has a cold wife. One he would leave, if it were not for the children and the financial inconvenience of a divorce settlement.

Most of my life, sex has been a story poorly told. Vague. Images blurred by metaphor like hot breath steams a mirror. Birds and bees. I've come back to that, my mother's old-fashioned way of telling it. Bands of sunlight shine through blinds. Shadows stripe your torso. Watching my body unfold like wings. Breasts swell like soft throats of birds. For singing. I am ready for song. Feel my fingers, single feathers, drifting light upon your skin. Fly with me on this blue bedspread sky. You are the bee, I guess, stinger rising bluntly from your belly. Bees do not survive the stinging. Leave parts behind. Die from need of them. Think about that. Hesitate.

I have a good memory. I remember useful things. Things amusing and otherwise. I can quote Wm. H. Walling, "If we search the entire animal kingdom we shall everywhere find the female stamped with the seal of physical subordination, save in the cases of certain birds and insects." Subordinate save in certain cases. Fair warning. Let it be clear. You are not the

first. Before you enter. Before you do. Remember. The leaving will kill you.