



Printer's Devil Review

Gabrielle Reeve. *How to Sex Yourself*.
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How to Sex Yourself

FIRST YOU WILL NEED TO BE BORN. You will come into this world to find you have something important that may make you like me and half the human race. Or it may make you like the other half. The half that wear it outside like a sword and a rocket and a car and a gun and the Empire State Building. This genital crapshoot is a fifty-fifty proposition. Good luck.

If you are like me, you will own scratchy pink dresses and Barbies. You will break a pencil trying to draw nipples on Barbie's blank and mountainous breasts. You will wear a witch mask for Halloween that smells like sweet rubber erasers. It will disappear when it becomes dangerous, when you are afraid to be ugly even for a little while.

Your parents will not be unhappy, but sometimes your mother will fling the plates onto the table at dinner and slam shoes and coats into their proper places with the ghost of a snarl on her lips. Then your parents will argue in half-stifled roars while you kneel on the floor, your head tilted over the heating vent that carries their voices into your room. Listen to your mother's scattered testimony of slights, a Sisyphian catalog of household duties weighed out against making peace. It will be easier to take your father's side because she cries and her voice grows shrill and terrible. Besides, you will think as you work out which lucky Barbie gets to marry the lone Ken, *Mom started it. She always starts it.* It doesn't occur to you that it started so, so long ago.

When you begin to grow breasts, you will be the one to fight with your mother. She won't let you wear a belly shirt outside the house. She will tell you darkly that things happen to girls who wear eye-catching clothes. (Maybe Red Riding Hood would have fared better in a nice slate gray or layered taupe.) The older you get, the less vague these threats will become, and by ninth grade she will be telling you about a woman who was raped on a crowded subway train while the other passengers stared through her like a ghost. The nightly news will be an object lesson and the crime blotter scattered with supporting examples. Someday you will not hate her for these obscene warnings. You will hate the boys who learn about these things slowly and remotely. Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? Not just the shadow. Not just you either but you learn it first and it doesn't just live in your brain; it travels over your skin and clings to your eyelashes. Remember the days your mother pulled your arm and walked faster, held you close – and you heard the rhythm of her heartbeat whisper: “Don't get raped. Don't get raped. Don't get raped.” You will hate the boys who were held like this, close and loving, by mothers and fathers who failed to tell them: “Don't rape. Don't rape anyone.” You will look more closely at the newspapers your mother studied. Accidently rip the page as your hand tightens around warnings from the police for young women to avoid the dark, to travel in packs, not to dress like sluts. “There are two elements necessary for a crime to occur: DESIRE and OPPORTUNITY.”

You are the opportunity.

Growing like ivy between your fear and vigilance (what's behind you, where are the exits, put your key ring in your fist, sharpest key poking out between your pointer and middle fingers like a dainty Wolverine, hurry) will be lust. Masturbate for the first time when you're eleven to Han Solo coming out of the carbonite at the beginning of *Return of the Jedi*. In sex ed you will learn about wet dreams and when it comes time to submit your anonymous questions, inquire hopefully if a girl can ever have one. Write this in cramped, nervous haste before anyone can read it over your shoulder. The teacher will somehow miss your slip when pulling queries out of an old Red Sox hat, and you will try to look it up in the textbook. It will say that everyone experiments and that's okay.

Then it will describe the habits and expectations of boys on the brink of manhood and their God-given right to flog the bishop. Nothing much will be said about girls, and you will be afraid. You will try to stop touching yourself. Basing your methods on fuzzy understandings of 12-step programs from movies and TV, you will attempt to wean yourself off sticking your hands down your pants at night. This won't work but you will learn that you don't feel as guilty before that nice thing at the end happens. You will try to put this off for as long as possible and if you feel it starting you make yourself stop for one full song on the radio (playing softly to muffle the rattle of your twin bed) before you can start again. This will lead to an embarrassing Pavlovian response to the song "Mambo Number Five" and sometimes your hand will cramp up. You will suspect that the reason boys your own age don't seem to like you very much is because they know you are not a real girl, not when you keep doing this dirty, bad thing.

When you enter high school, you will gaze so intensely into your own navel that you will fall into it and live off your wits in a belly button kingdom of hormones and books and tentative sips of vodka. You will seem beyond gender, obsessed with sex but so dwarfed by discovery that you will fancy yourself a questing eye, unanchored by binary bodies.

One day when you are even older, and perhaps a little less of a nerd, you will make the truly miraculous discovery that things can touch you. Grandparents will die and friendships will end. But you will lock lips with a girl who tastes like pizza and beer as she presses you against the chilly stone wall of a church. You will lose your virginity on a futon because the boy who invited you upstairs to watch *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* cannot afford a bed. You will have a lot of sex and be shocked you didn't think of this before. Mostly you will date older men. Boys your age still don't like you for very long.

But you will not forget the subway rapist and the constant fearful litany of a woman walking alone. Homeless men will ask you if your pussy tastes good; you will stop giving them change. You get in few fights but fantasize often about punching someone – a meaty, honest wallop in a sneering face, cutting your knuckles on tufts of wannabe beard. Sometimes, when the bruised sky turns the purple pink of a

sloppy Easter egg, being brave and being stupid will be the same. You will smother the cluck and whine of your mother's voice as the light fades and you turn into the shadowy alley between KFC and the old Nike factory. Your heart will flutter and your feet will fall blindly on the uneven asphalt but you will gobble up the fear because it's better than being chickenshit and angry.

Don't forget to become truly angry sometimes or you will burn through your makeup and clothing and urban impassivity. Do it at the window in winter with a cigarette in your hands if you can.

Here are three stories that you will never stop telling yourself:

When it's your turn to research a world topic for seventh-grade social studies you will Google "gender issues" because it seems important. Your search will return 11,900,000 results, but just by chance you will read about female circumcision first because you live in a really Jewish town and you will wonder if this combination of words is a joke or a metaphor. You will learn about rusty cans and little girls sewn up while their aunties hold them down. Your face will flush and your ears burn because it is true in a way no reported foreign travesty or true crime has been for you before. Men accustomed to dealing in girls proved pure, sealed shut against temptation until a husband breaks them open, unwraps them like a bloody, mutilated gift. You will go the bathroom and be sick before the presentations begin. Other people will talk about solar power and elections. When it's your turn, you won't get past your second slide before the boys in your class start shouting.

"This is freaking disgusting! No one wants to hear about this!" They pantomime gagging and someone coughs "Cram it lesbo" just soft enough that you're not sure you heard it. A few of them get a couple rounds of "Shut up" chanting in before the harried teacher absentmindedly silences them. You've grown up with these guys, and your friends are here somewhere, but all you can hear is the booing and hissing, and all you can see is the slide in front of you with the picture of the dented Campbell's top sharpened to a blade. Later you will challenge some of these boys to a fight behind the big tree at lunch but none of them will show.

Years later you will read about a B-list actress-director who was killed in her apartment by a construction worker who lived down the

hall. He claims it was because she asked him to keep the music down. You will become fascinated and repulsed by this story. You will read that at first she was thought a suicide because he hung her in her own shower. You will watch a movie she made about domestic abuse and pie. You will find out that the child actor in the film is actually her daughter, the entire script a kind of love letter to her pregnancy, and you will watch the little girl wave to the camera over and over again, wondering when she'll read the news articles and police reports you've combed through almost every day for a week.

Egypt will have a revolution, and you will see a video of a young woman in a veil leading the chanting at a demonstration. You will post anything you find about violent government responses to the protestors on Facebook or your blog because you think it's important that *people know the truth*. On the day their demands are met, the crowd in Tahrir Square will separate an American reporter from her crew. She will be gang-raped by almost two hundred men. You will not know how to celebrate their victory anymore. You will try to read a book instead. You will understand that turning a story about Middle Eastern peoples overthrowing a dictator on their own terms into the individual saga of a white woman in peril is wrong, but you won't be able to stop thinking about it, so you won't say anything at all. You will get in another bar fight and you will lose again and be released from a chokehold only because you cry. Later you will read that the reporter was rescued in the end by a group of women and Egyptian soldiers, but your arm will ache where he grabbed you to stop a right hook so you will quickly forget.

These things will rest under your eyelids. Go home, eat a snack, brush your teeth. Read a book about a man in a desert with a gun. That man is you. You quest and you understand. You could read a book about a woman but you've read them all and you want to feel powerful and iconic and simple. You can't run away from men forever. And not from this man, this gunslinger. He lays down evil with twin pistols and strides across mountains. Then he sees a woman. And you are both of them at once. And unless you are very, very lucky, things begin to go wrong because she doesn't speak naturally like him. She is speaking across a great silence and her words warble on the same notes all the

time. Sex and power and good and evil get bounced off her like sonar so that he can feel it. So you can feel it. But you see her and you wonder and the book doesn't hold you the same now. You put it down. Close the windows. Lock the door. Make sure the curtains are closed so no one peeps while you slip into pajamas. Double check the door. Close your eyes.

Can you even dream yourself born like the other half? 🌸