

CHAPTER 1

the cult of virginity

“He said it was men invented virginity
not women. Father said it’s like death:
only a state in which others are left...”

WILLIAM FAULKNER,
The Sound and the Fury

IN THE MOMENTS AFTER I FIRST HAD SEX, my then-boyfriend—lying down next to me over his lint-covered blanket—grabbed a pen from his nightstand and drew a heart on the wall molding above his bed with our initials and the date inside. The only way you could see it was by lying flat on the bed with your head smashed up against the wall. Crooked necks aside, it was a sweet gesture, one that I’d forgotten about until I started writing this book.

The date seemed so important to us at the time, even though the event itself was hardly awe-inspiring. There was the expected fumbling, a joke about his fish-printed boxers, and ensuing condom difficulties. At one point, his best friend even called to see how things were going. I suppose romance and discretion are lost on sixteen-year-olds from Brooklyn. Yet we celebrated

our “anniversary” every year until we broke up, when Josh left for college two years before me and met a girl with a lip ring.

I’ve often wondered what that date marks—the day I became a woman? Considering I still bought underwear in cutesy three-packs, and that I certainly hadn’t mastered the art of speaking my mind, I’ve gotta go with no. Societal standards would have me believe that it was the day I became morally sullied, but I fail to see how anything that lasts less than five minutes can have such an indelible ethical impact—so it’s not that, either.

Really, the only meaning it had (besides a little bit of pain and a lot of postcoital embarrassment) was the meaning that Josh and I ascribed to it. Or so I thought. I hadn’t counted on the meaning my peers, my parents, and society would imbue it with on my behalf.

From that date on—in the small, incestuous world of high school friendships, nothing is a secret for long—I was a “sexually active teen,” a term often used in tandem with phrases like “at risk,” or alongside warnings about drug and alcohol use, regardless of how uncontroversial the sex itself may have been. Through the rest of high school, whenever I had a date, my peers assumed that I had had sex because my sexuality had been defined by that one moment when my virginity was lost. It meant that I was no longer discriminating, no longer “good.” The perceived change in my social value wasn’t lost on my parents, either; before I graduated high school, my mother found an empty condom wrapper in my bag and remarked that if I kept having sex, no one would want to marry me.*

I realize that my experience isn’t necessarily representative of most women’s—everyone has their own story—but there are common themes in

* After years of denying she ever said such a thing, to her benefit, my mother finally sheepishly apologized.

so many young women's sexual journeys. Sometimes it's shame. Sometimes it's violence. Sometimes it's pleasure. And sometimes it's simply nothing to write home about.

The idea that virginity (or loss thereof) can profoundly affect women's lives is certainly nothing new. But what virginity is, what it was, and how it's being used now to punish women and roll back their rights is at the core of the purity myth. Because today, in a world where porn culture and reenergized abstinence movements collide, the moral panic myth about young women's supposed promiscuity is diverting attention from the real problem—that women are still being judged (sometimes to death) on something that doesn't really exist: virginity.

THE VIRGINITY MYSTERY

Before Hanne Blank wrote her book *Virgin: The Untouched History*, she had a bit of a problem. Blank was answering teens' questions on Scarleteen¹—a sex-education website she founded with writer Heather Corinna so that young people could access information about sex online, other than porn and Net Nanny—when she discovered that she kept hitting a roadblock when it came to the topic of virginity.

"One of the questions that kept coming up was 'I did such-and-such. Am I still a virgin?'" Blank told me in an interview. "They desperately wanted an authoritative answer."

But she just didn't have one. So Blank decided to spend some time in Harvard's medical school library to find a definitive answer for her young web browsers.

"I spent about a week looking through everything I could—medical dictionaries, encyclopedias, anatomies—trying to find some sort of diagnostic standard for virginity," Blank said.

The problem was, there was no standard. Either a book wouldn't mention virginity at all or it would provide a definition that wasn't medical, but subjective.

"Then it dawned on me—I'm in arguably one of the best medical libraries in the world, scouring their stacks, and I'm not finding anything close to a medical definition for virginity. And I thought, *That's really weird. That's just flat-out strange.*"

Blank said she found it odd mostly because everyone, including doctors, talks about virginity as if they know what it is—but no one ever bothers to mention the truth: "People have been talking authoritatively about virginity for thousands of years, yet we don't even have a working medical definition for it!"

Blank now refers to virginity as "the state of having not had partnered sex." But if virginity is simply the first time someone has sex, then what is sex? If it's just heterosexual intercourse, then we'd have to come to the fairly ridiculous conclusion that all lesbians and gay men are virgins, and that different kinds of intimacy, like oral sex, mean nothing. And even using the straight-intercourse model of sex as a gauge, we'd have to get into the down-and-dirty conversation of what constitutes penetration.*

Since I've become convinced that virginity is a sham being perpetrated against women, I decided to turn to other people to see how they "count" sex. Most say it's penetration. Some say it's oral sex. My closest friend, Kate, a lesbian, has the best answer to date (a rule I've followed since she shared it with

* My college roommate Jen and I, I'm somewhat ashamed to admit, had a three pumps or more rule. Less than three pumps? You didn't have to count it as sex. We thought it was genius, as the three pump chumps, as we called them, were not necessarily the guys you wanted to remember.

me): It isn't sex unless you've had an orgasm. That's a pleasure-based, non-heteronormative way of marking intimacy if I've ever heard one. Of course, this way of defining sex isn't likely to be very popular among the straight-male sect, given that some would probably end up not counting for many of their partners.

But any way you cut it, virginity is just too subjective to pretend we can define it.

Laura Carpenter, a professor at Vanderbilt University and the author of *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences*, told me that when she wrote her book, she was loath to even use the word "virginity," lest she propagate the notion that there's one concrete definition for it.²

"What is this thing, this social phenomenon? I think the emphasis put on virginity, particularly for women, causes a lot more harm than good," said Carpenter.³

This has much to do with the fact that "virgin" is almost always synonymous with "woman." Virgin sacrifices, popping cherries, white dresses, supposed vaginal tightness, you name it. Outside of the occasional reference to the male virgin in the form of a goofy movie about horny teenage boys, virginity is pretty much all about women. Even the dictionary definitions of "virgin" cite an "unmarried girl or woman" or a "religious woman, esp. a saint."⁴ No such definition exists for men or boys.

It's this inextricable relationship between sexual purity and women—how we're either virgins or not virgins—that makes the very concept of virginity so dangerous and so necessary to do away with.

Admittedly, it would be hard to dismiss virginity as we know it altogether, considering the meaning it has in so many people's—especially women's—lives. When I suggest that virginity is a lie told to women, I don't aim to discount or make light of how important the current social idea of vir-

ginity is for some people. Culture, religion, and social beliefs influence the role that virginity and sexuality play in women's lives—sometimes very positively. So, to be clear, when I argue for an end to the idea of virginity, it's because I believe sexual intimacy should be honored and respected, but that it shouldn't be revered at the expense of women's well-being, or seen as such an integral part of female identity that we end up defining ourselves by our sexuality.

I also can't discount that no matter what personal meaning each woman gives virginity, it's people who have social and political influence who ultimately get to decide what virginity means—at least, as it affects women on a large scale.

VIRGINITY: COMMODITY, MORALITY, OR FARCE?
It's hard to know when people started caring about virginity, but we do know that men, or male-led institutions, have always been the ones that get to define and assign value to virginity.

Blank posits that a long-standing historical interest in virginity is about establishing paternity (if a man marries a virgin, he can be reasonably sure the child she bears is his) and about using women's sexuality as a commodity. Either way, the notion has always been deeply entrenched in patriarchy and male ownership.

Raising daughters of quality became another model of production, as valuable as breeding healthy sheep, weaving sturdy cloth, or bringing in a good harvest. . . . The gesture is now generally symbolic in the first world, but we nonetheless still observe the custom of the father "giving" his daughter in marriage. Up until the last century or so, however, when laws were liberalized to allow women to stand as full citizens in their own right, this represented a literal transfer of property from a father's household to a husband's.⁵

That's why women who had sex were (and still are, at times) referred to as "damaged goods"—because they were literally just that: something to be owned, traded, bought, and sold.

But long gone are the days when women were property . . . or so we'd like to think. It's not just wedding traditions or outdated laws that name women's virginity as a commodity; women's virginity, our sexuality, is still assigned a value by a movement with more power and influence in American society than we'd probably like to admit.

I like to call this movement the virginity movement.* And it is a movement, indeed—with conservatives and evangelical Christians at the helm, and our government, school systems, and social institutions taking orders. Composed of antifeminist think tanks like the Independent Women's Forum and Concerned Women for America; abstinence-only "educators" and organizations; religious leaders; and legislators with regressive social values, the virginity movement is much more than just the same old sexism; it's a targeted and well-funded backlash that is rolling back women's rights using revamped and modernized definitions of purity, morality, and sexuality. Its goals are mired in old-school gender roles, and the tool it's using is young women's sexuality. (What better way to get people to pay attention to your cause than to frame it in terms of teenage girls' having, or not having, sex? It's salacious!)

And, like it or not, the members of the virginity movement are the people who are defining virginity—and, to a large extent, sexuality—in America. Now, instead of women's virginity being explicitly bought and

* The "abstinence movement" would be accurate, as would the "chastity movement." But neither quite captures how this obsession really is about virginity, virgins, and an almost too-enthusiastic focus on young women's sexuality. So the "virginity movement" seemed not only appropriate, but also a bit needling. Which I enjoy.

sold with dowries and business deals, it's being defined as little more than a stand-in for actual morality.

It's genius, really. Shame women into being chaste and tell them that all they have to do to be "good" is not have sex. (Of course, chastity and purity, as defined by the virginity movement, are not just about abstaining sexually so much as they're about upholding a specific, passive model of womanhood. But more on this later.)

For women especially, virginity has become the easy answer—the morality quick fix. You can be vapid, stupid, and unethical, but so long as you've never had sex, you're a "good" (i.e., "moral") girl and therefore worthy of praise.

Present-day American society—whether through pop culture, religion, or institutions—conflates sexuality and morality constantly. Idolizing virginity as a stand-in for women's morality means that nothing else matters—not what we accomplish, not what we think, not what we care about and work for. Just if/how/whom we have sex with. That's all.

Just look at the women we venerate for not having sex: pageant queens who run on abstinence platforms, pop singers who share their virginal status, and religious women who "save themselves" for marriage. It's an interesting state of affairs when women have to simply do, well, *nothing* in order to be considered ethical role models. As Feministing.com commenter electron-Blue noted in response to the 2008 *New York Times Magazine* article "Students of Virginity," on abstinence clubs at Ivy League colleges, "There were a WHOLE LOTTA us not having sex at Harvard . . . but none of us thought that that was special enough to start a club about it, for pete's sake."⁶

But for plenty of women across the country, it *is* special. Staying "pure" and "innocent" is touted as the greatest thing we can do. However, equating

this inaction with morality not only is problematic because it continues to tie women's ethics to our bodies, but also is downright insulting because it suggests that women can't be moral actors. Instead, we're defined by what we don't do—our ethics are the ethics of passivity. (This model of ethics fits in perfectly with how the virginity movement defines the ideal woman.)

Proponents of chastity and abstinence, though, would have us believe that abstaining indeed requires strength and action. Janie Fredell, one of the students quoted in the above-mentioned *New York Times Magazine* piece, penned a college newspaper article claiming that virginity is "rooted . . . in the notion of strength."

"It takes a strong woman to be abstinent, and that's the sort of woman I want to be," Fredell told the magazine.⁷ Her rhetoric of strength is part of a growing trend among the conservative virginity-fetish sect, which is likely the result of virginity movement leaders seeing how questionable the "passive virgin" is in modern society. Now we're seeing virginity proponents assert their fortitude. Conservative messages aimed at young men even call on them to be "virginity warriors," driving home the message that it's men's responsibility to safeguard virginity for their female counterparts, simultaneously quashing any fears of feminization that boys may have surrounding abstinence.

Perhaps it's true that in our sex-saturated culture, it does take a certain amount of self-discipline to resist having sex, but restraint does not equal morality. And let's be honest: If this were simply about resisting peer pressure and being strong, then the women who have sex because they actively want to—as appalling as that idea might be to those who advocate abstinence—wouldn't be scorned. Because the "strength" involved in these women's choice would be about doing what they want despite pressure to

the contrary, not about resisting the sex act itself. But women who have sex are often denigrated by those who revere virginity. As feminist blogger Jill Filipovic noted in response to Fredell:

I appreciate and applaud the personal strength of individuals who decide abstinence is the best choice for them. But what I can't support is the constant attacks on sexually active people. People who have sex do not feel a constant need to tell abstinent people that their human dignity has been compromised, or that they're dirty, or that they are secretly unhappy, or that they're headed for total life ruin.⁸

And that is exactly what young women are taught, thanks in no small part to conservative backlash. In 2005, for example, the evangelical Christian group Focus on the Family came out with a study reporting that having sex before the age of eighteen makes you more likely to end up poor and divorced.⁹ Given that the median age for sexual initiation for all Americans—male and female—is seventeen, I wonder how shocked most women will be when they learn that they have a life of poverty-stricken spinsterhood to look forward to!

But it's not only abstinence education or conservative propaganda that are perpetuating this message; you need look no further than pop culture for stark examples of how young people—especially young women—are taught to use virginity as an easy ethical road map.

A 2007 episode of the MTV documentary series *True Life* featured celibate youth.¹⁰ Among the teens choosing to abstain because of disease concerns and religious commitments was nineteen-year-old Kristin from Nashville, Tennessee. Kristin had cheated on her past boyfriends, and told

the camera she'd decided to remain celibate until she feels she can be faithful to her current boyfriend. Clearly, Kristin's problem isn't sex—it's trust. But instead of dealing with the actual issues behind her relationship woes, this young woman was able to circumvent any real self-analysis by simply claiming to be abstinent. So long as she's chaste, she's good.

Or consider singer and reality television celebrity Jessica Simpson, who has made her career largely by playing on the sexy-virgin stereotype. Simpson, the daughter of a Baptist youth minister, started her singing career by touring Christian youth festivals and True Love Waits events. Even when she went mainstream, she publicly declared her virginity—stating that her father had given her a promise ring when she was twelve years old—and spoke of her intention to wait to have sex until marriage. Meanwhile, not surprisingly, Simpson was being marketed as a major sex symbol—all blond hair, breasts, and giggles. Especially giggles. Simpson's character (and I use the word "character" because it's hard to know what was actually her and not a finely honed image) was sold as the archetypal dumb blond. Thoughtless moments on *Newlyweds*, the MTV show that followed her short-lived marriage to singer Nick Lachey, became nationally known sound bites, such as Simpson's wondering aloud whether tuna was chicken or fish, since the can read "Chicken of the Sea."

Despite Simpson's public persona as an airhead (as recently as 2008, she was featured in a Macy's commercial as not understanding how to flick on a light switch), women are supposed to want to be her, not only because she's beautiful by conventional standards, but also because she adheres to the social structures that tell women that they exist purely for men: as a virgin, as a sex symbol, or, in Simpson's case, as both. It doesn't matter that Simpson reveals few of her actual thoughts or moral beliefs; it's enough that she's "pure," even if that purity means she's a bit of a dolt.

For those women who can't keep up the front as well as someone like Simpson, they suffer heaps of judgment—especially when they fall off the pedestal they're posed upon so perfectly. American pop culture, especially, has an interesting new trend of venerating and fetishizing “pure” young women—whether they're celebrities, beauty queens, or just everyday young women—simply to bask in their eventual fall.

And no one embodies the “perfect” young American woman like beauty queens. They're pretty, overwhelmingly white, thin, and eager to please.* And, of course, pageant queens are supposed to be as pure as pure can be. In fact, until 1999, the Miss America pageant had a “purity rule” that barred divorced women and those who had obtained abortions from entering the contest—lest they sully the competition, I suppose.¹¹

So in 2006, when two of those “perfect” girls made the news for being in scandalous photos on the Internet, supposed promiscuity, or a combination thereof, Americans were transfixed.

First, twenty-year-old Miss USA Tara Conner was nearly stripped of her title after reports surfaced that she frequented nightclubs, drank, and dated. Hardly unusual behavior for a young woman, regardless of how many tiaras she may have.

The *New York Daily News* could barely contain its slut-shaming glee when it reported on the story: “‘She really is a small-town girl. She just went wild when she came to the city,’ one nightlife veteran said. ‘Tara just couldn't handle herself. They were sneaking those [nightclub] guys in and out of the

* Who, after all, can maintain a pearly white perma-grin through humiliating bathing suit competitions and inane questions—all for scholarships that are paltry in comparison to the money spent on gowns and coaches—other than women looking for some serious validation?

apartment' . . . Conner still brought boyfriends home. . . . Soon she broke up with her hometown fiancé and started dating around in the Manhattan night-club world. . . . ”¹²

Instead of having her crown taken away, however, Conner was publicly “forgiven” by Miss USA co-owner Donald Trump, who appeared at a press conference to publicly declare he was giving the young woman a second chance.¹³ In case you had any doubts about whether this controversy was all tied up with male ownership and approval, consider the fact that Trump later reportedly considered giving his permission for Conner to pose for *Playboy* magazine. He played the role of dad, pimp, and owner, all rolled into one.¹⁴

Mere days later, Miss Nevada USA, twenty-two-year-old Katie Rees, was dethroned after pictures of her exposing one of her breasts and mooning the camera were uncovered.¹⁵ When you’re on a pedestal, you have a long way to fall.

And, of course, it’s impossible to talk about tipped-over pedestals without mentioning pop singer Britney Spears. Spears, first made famous by her hit song “Baby One More Time” and its accompanying video, in which she appeared in a Catholic schoolgirl mini-uniform, was very much the American purity princess. She publicly declared her virginity and belief in abstinence before marriage, all the while being marketed—much like Simpson was—as a sex symbol. But unlike Simpson, Spears fell far from grace in the eyes of the American public. The most obvious indications of her decline were splashed across newspapers and entertainment weeklies worldwide—a breakdown during which she shaved her head in front of photographers, and various pictures of her drunk and sans panties. But Spears began distancing herself from the virgin ideal long before these incidents hit the tabloids.

First, Spears got some press for moving in with then-boyfriend and

fellow pop star Justin Timberlake. But the sexist brouhaha began in earnest when Spears was no longer considered “attractive,” because she started to gain weight, got pregnant, and no longer looked like a little girl. Pictures of her cellulite popped up on websites and gossip magazines nationwide, along with guesstimations about her weight and jokes about her stomach. Because “purity” isn’t just about not having sex, it’s about not being a woman—and instead being in a state of perpetual girlhood (more on this in Chapter 3).

Shaming young women for being sexual is nothing new, but it’s curious to observe how the expectation of purity gets played out through the women who are supposed to epitomize the feminine ideal: the “desirable” virgin. After all, we rarely see women who aren’t conventionally beautiful idolized for their abstinence. And no matter how “good” you are otherwise—even if you’re an all-American beauty queen—if you’re not virginal, you’re shamed.

The desirable virgin is sexy but not sexual. She’s young, white, and skinny. She’s a cheerleader, a baby sitter; she’s accessible and eager to please (remember those ethics of passivity!). She’s never a woman of color. She’s never a low-income girl or a fat girl. She’s never disabled. “Virgin” is a designation for those who meet a certain standard of what women, especially younger women, are supposed to look like. As for how these young women are supposed to act? A blank slate is best.

SELLING VIRGINITY

Unfortunately, this morality model of virginity—in which women’s morals and ethical ability are defined solely by their sexual status—isn’t the only type the virginity movement is pushing. Viewing virginity as a commodity—as it was seen back in the days in which daughters were exchanged as property—lives on, just in less obvious ways (though, arguably, much more insidiously).

Now fathers participate in purity balls and virginity pledges to maintain ownership over their daughters, even if it's only symbolic. Women's sexuality is still very much for sale.

Not so shockingly to those of us who do feminist and progressive political work, the conservative, religious right has been at the center of keeping women's bodies on the market. The backlash against women's rights over the past three decades has ranged from rolling back our reproductive rights to launching antisexuality scare-tactic campaigns—all part of a larger concerted effort desperately seeking a return to traditional gender roles. Make no mistake about it—these efforts are at the heart of the virginity movement and its goals.

And they've been successful. To a large extent, the virginity movement is the new authority on sexuality. It's in our schools, telling our children what sex is (dirty, wrong, and dangerous), and in our homes, creating legislation that violates women's privacy and bodies (more on this in Chapter 6).

In addition to promoting the virginity-as-morality model, the virginity movement is working hard to reaffirm virginity as something to be bought, sold, and owned. Sometimes these attempts transpire in more obvious ways than others.

Take, for example, Virginity Vouchers. Sold to abstinence educators as abstinence commitment cards to hand out to students, these vouchers, which look much like credit cards, feature a background image of a bride and groom with the words VIRGINITY VOUCHER: DON'T BUY THE LIE, SAVE SEX FOR MARRIAGE emblazoned across it. The Abstinence Clearinghouse, the largest and best-known abstinence education nonprofit organization in the country, sells the card on its website and makes no effort to hide the fact that this product is, quite literally, commodifying virginity:

*This “Virginity Voucher” is a hard plastic commitment card with a place on the back to sign their name. Created for both young men and women, this card can be kept in their wallet to remind them of their decision!*¹⁶

Right along with their MasterCard and Visas!

Or consider another abstinence product: a gold rose pin handed out in schools and at Christian youth events. The pin is attached to a small card that reads, “You are like a beautiful rose. Each time you engage in pre-marital sex, a precious petal is stripped away. Don’t leave your future husband holding a bare stem. Abstain.”¹⁷

Do we really want to teach our daughters that without their virginity, they’re nothing but a “bare stem”?

Abstinence-only education (see Chapter 5), which receives more than \$178 million a year in federal funding, is chock full of lessons like these that tell students that female sexuality is a “gift,” “precious,” and something to “save.”

A 2008 advertisement promoting Abstinence Awareness Week in Washington, D.C., told young women to “guard your diamond” alongside a picture of a tremendous gem covered in chains and a lock.¹⁸

And, of course, there are purity balls—the federally funded father/daughter dances where girls as young as age six pledge their virginity to their dads, who in turn pledge to hang on to said virginity until an appropriate husband comes along, to whom the fathers can transfer ownership of their daughters.

Not all of the virginity-for-sale messages are so overt, but all of them are sexist and all of them are dangerous. Why? Because if virginity is a gift, or something “worth saving,” that means that those who don’t save it are somehow lacking—or, even worse, sullied.

Sex-as-dirty and women-as-tainted messages are central to the virgin-

ity movement and are perpetuated most visibly in the most unfortunate of places—our schools. The primary perpetrator, abstinence-only education, has established programs across the country to tell young women that they're somehow spoiled by sex.

One popular classroom exercise, for example, employs Scotch Tape to demonstrate how premarital sex can make girls dirty.* A teacher holds up a clear strip of tape, meant to represent a girl, in front of the class. The teacher then puts the strip of tape, adhesive side down, on the arm of a boy in the class, to symbolize his sexual relationship with the girl. The teacher rips off the tape (signifying the breakup, apparently) and holds it up again for the class to look at. Students are meant to see that the strip of tape—the girl—has picked up all kinds of dirt and hair from the boy's arm and is no longer clean. Then, when the teacher tries to stick the same strip of tape to another boy's arm, he or she notes that it doesn't stick—they can't bond! To end things with a bang, the abstinence educator makes a remark about the girl's being "used" and therefore unable to have strong future relationships.¹⁹

In another popular exercise, abstinence teachers' use candy to make their "dirty" points. These candy exercises often consist of teachers' showing how the candy can't fit back into its wrapper after being chewed/sucked/eaten. Another program in Nevada even used its abstinence-only state funding to run public radio service ads that said girls will feel "dirty and cheap" after having sex. (The ads were later pulled due to listener outrage.²⁰) The fact that these examples nearly always focus on girls is no coincidence. After all, our bodies are the ones that get objectified and pathologized, and it's our morality that's supposedly in jeopardy.

* Most classroom exercises focus on girls and their potential filthiness.

But sullied students across America shouldn't fret! The virginity movement has ensured that there's a way out of the dirt trap: Megan Landry of Houma, Louisiana, signed a "Pure Love Promise" commitment card when she was sixteen years old while attending Abbey Youth Fest, a Louisiana event for young Catholics. The card, which she signed, dated, and carried in her wallet, reads, "Believing that sex is sacred, I promise to God that I will save the gift of my sexuality from now until marriage. I choose to glorify God with my body and pursue a life of purity, trusting that the Lord is never outdone in generosity."²¹

As it turns out, Landry had already lost her virginity to a boyfriend when she was in the tenth grade, but she was moved to sign the card anyway after hearing one of the event speakers, Jason Evert, author of *Pure Love*.

"[Evert] gave a talk about purity and saving yourself for marriage. He told us about how he had waited until he was married for sex, but his fiancée had already slept with someone. They both decided to not sleep with each other—he took a pledge and his girlfriend took a secondary virginity pledge. I just thought that was sooooo sweeeet," Landry wrote in an email to me.

The notion of secondary virginity—that you can regain your spiritual and emotional purity by pledging abstinence until marriage, no matter what your sexual history—first became popular in the mid-1980s among conservative Christian groups.²² Also called born-again virginity, the notion is widespread in Christian programs for young people, abstinence-only education, and even pop culture.

Perhaps sensing that the number of teen virgins in the United States was diminishing, religious groups saw secondary virginity as their opportunity to (for lack of a better term) put more asses in the seats. What better way to increase the numbers of virginity pledgers than to open up the process

to everyone—even the promiscuous! It's possible that the virginity movement even recognized that the purity standard of not having intercourse was simply unrealistic, and saw how promoting a promise that focused on emotional and spiritual purity might woo those who felt ostracized by their virginityless status.

What I find interesting about secondary virginity is that while it may seem like an easy out, with its emphasis on emotional and spiritual purity, it actually takes a hardline approach to chastity and has the effect of increasing the obstacles to being pure. After all, to be a virgin, all you have to do is not have sex. But to fully embrace your secondary virginity, you must abstain not only from intercourse, but also from masturbation or even thinking about sex. And there's no more of this "anything but" nonsense, either—Love Matters, a teen abstinence program, tells those considering being secondary virgins to "avoid intense hugging," and that "anything beyond a brief, simple kiss can quickly become dangerous."²³

Some groups even advise women to change the way they act and dress to convey their chastity appropriately. An article from Focus on the Family, "Pure Again," notes that "women find they want to try a different way of dressing—to show more respect for their own bodies."²⁴

Despite efforts to link secondary virginity to teens' emotional and spiritual selves, the virginity movement's obsession with bodily purity is impossible to hide. Undercutting the movement's argument that purity is about spirituality is the fact that many of the secondary-virginity and chastity messages come from crisis pregnancy centers, groups that masquerade

* As with most things in the virginity movement, there's a lot of lip service when it comes to young men and secondary or born-again virginity, but the focus remains on women.

as medical clinics when their actual purpose is to convince young women not to have abortions. What could be more intimately tied with women's bodies and sexuality than pregnancy? And, let's face it, the language of secondary virginity isn't exactly subtle. On the website for A Pregnancy Resource Center of Northeast Ohio, an article titled "Take2" asks, "Have you already unwrapped the priceless gift of virginity and given it away? Do you now feel like 'second-hand goods' and no longer worthy to be cherished? Do you ever wish you could re-wrap it and give it only to your future husband or wife?"²⁵

But not to worry, there's an answer! "Guess what? You can be abstinent again! You can't change the past, but you can change the future. You can decide today to commit to abstinence, wrapping a brand-new gift of virginity to present to your husband or wife on your wedding night."²⁶

The message is clear: Without your "gift," you're "second-hand goods." (Or at least, if you're properly repentant, that's what you should feel like.)

Like most virginity pledges, the appeal of secondary virginity doesn't seem to last long. Landry, the secondary virginity-pledging teen from Louisiana, broke her pledge within the year:

As the months went by, I gradually stopped hanging out with my religious friends and got a serious boyfriend," she said. "About eight months after I signed the pledge, on New Year's Eve, I had no use for that card anymore. We dated for about one month before we had sex. After this relationship, I had no interest in abstinence and purity pledges. I was over it.

Landry is not alone in being "over it." Like first-time virginity pledgers, secondary virginity pledgers are likely to abandon their promise, and

even more likely to not use contraception.* Another young virginity pledger, Emily Seipel of Michigan, even told me that her high school virginity pledge was “an easy [way] to resist flesh sins when you’re already a closeted lesbian.” (Gay people don’t exist in the virginity movement, remember?) Seipel, who is technically still a virgin by conventional standards, is far from alone. The purity that the virginity movement is working so hard for is more of an illusion than it would like to own up to. Teens who make these pledges often do so in front of church members, peers, parents, and community leaders, and oftentimes they have no real choice in the matter. It’s not as if many twelve- to fourteen-year-olds are going to be self-assured enough to refuse to take a chastity vow. (“No thanks, Mom, I’d like to keep my sexual options open!”) These pledges are little more than cultural farces created to make parents feel better about their children’s coming of age. And, frankly, parents who buy into the purity myth need some hope; after all, mainstream media would have them believe that their daughters are going wild and are perhaps irredeemably tainted (more on this in Chapter 2).

Whether they’re pledges, bare stems, or Virginity Vouchers, the messages are clearly regressive. But virginity proponents are doing one heck of a job marketing them as “revolutionary” and “empowering.” Appropriating feminist rhetoric to reinforce traditional gender roles is nothing if not brilliant.

Wendy Shalit, a writer and virginity guru whose first book, *A Return to Modesty: Discovering Lost Virtue*, was the topic of much debate when it was released in 2000, is a prime player in the “making abstinence cool” movement (or, as she calls it, the “modesty movement”). Shalit, who in 2007 penned

* Contraception is for “bad” girls who planned out sex, not girls who got caught in the heat of the moment. And, of course, many of these teens are taught that birth control doesn’t work anyway, so why bother?

another ode to chastity, *Girls Gone Mild: Young Women Reclaim Self-Respect and Find It's Not Bad to Be Good*, founded a website, the Modesty Zone,²⁷ and a blog, Modestly Yours,²⁸ which has twenty-one in-house bloggers. The site describes itself as “an informal community of young women who don’t have a voice in the mainstream media.”

“Whether you’re a virgin waiting until marriage, or just against casual sex more generally, you can find a safe harbour here to share your ideals, interests, and goals for the future,” it reads. The Modesty Zone features “Rebels of the Month” and slogans like “Be Daring, keep your shirt on!” Of course, the core message of the modesty movement is still in plain view, as evidenced by the blog’s tagline: “Modesty Zone: A site for good girls.”

Some virginity-movement members are even resorting to using sex to sell their antisex message. A shirt being sold on the website of the Heritage Foundation, a conservative Christian organization, says, VIRGINS ARE HOT, and groups on Facebook dedicated to the same message call their own work “passion for purity.”

What’s most telling about all of these efforts, whether they’re being executed via education, religion, or social imperatives, is that they’re not working—at least, not in the ways the movement would like them to. Virginity pledges have proved ineffective time and time again; the same is true of abstinence-only education.²⁹ Blogs like Shalit’s Modesty Zone have little web traffic,³⁰ and the purity groups on social-networking sites are dwarfed by groups like “This is what a feminist looks like” or even those as trivial as “If You Can’t Differentiate Between ‘Your’ and ‘You’re’ You Deserve To Die.”

Despite its inability to keep women “pure,” or to convince most Americans that abstinence is best, the virginity movement is strong, well funded, and everywhere. While there isn’t a critical mass of young people who iden-

tify with this movement, that doesn't mean they aren't affected by it; these are the people who are teaching our kids about sex and teaching our daughters about morality. And what they're teaching them is wrong.

Abstinence-only classes are part of the reason why one in four young American women have a sexually transmitted infection (STI),³¹ and are certainly to blame for the disturbing revelation that teens in Florida believe drinking a cap of bleach will prevent HIV, and a shot of Mountain Dew will stop pregnancy.³² These are the organizations with billboards peppered across America's highways telling young women, *WAIT FOR THE BLING* and *THE ULTIMATE WEDDING GIFT IS YOUR VIRGINITY*.³³

All of these messages—which position certain young women as the ideal, substitute sexual purity for real morality, and commodify virginity—are part of a larger effort to roll back all women's rights. The virginity movement is seeking a return to traditional gender roles, and focusing on purity is the vehicle toward that end.

When I emailed my high school ex to let him know about this book, I asked him about our first time and what he took away from the experience. Like mine, his memories were wrought with uncomfortable moments* and questions. He remembers writing the date above his bed as a way to add permanence to a fleeting moment. I was surprised to learn, however, that his views about women's sexuality weren't any more sophisticated than what I remembered them to be during our teenage years.

"No matter how sexually curious or 'ready' a girl is, she seems to be able to keep her wits about her a bit better than her male counterparts, so more is expected of [women], and rightly so," Josh wrote to me. This is an all-too-

* Like his trying to hold back by staring at a bottle of Drakkar Noir cologne and attempting to spell the name backward.

common assertion—the idea that women are somehow less sexual than men and are therefore the gatekeepers of sexual morals. It's a fundamental notion of the virginity movement, however, so I shouldn't have been so shocked to hear this line of reasoning being regurgitated by my former boyfriend. After all, the purity message is widespread. But it's one thing to hear the media use this type of language about Britney Spears; it was quite another to hear an ex-boyfriend use it about me. At the end of the day, though, it *is* about me—it's about all of us. However theoretically we'd like to discuss issues of virginity, purity, and women's moral value, the fact is, they affect all of us.