Letter to Claire Luce

By: John Steinbeck
Adapted by Fishtank Staff

To Claire Luce
Los Gatos [1938]

Dear Miss Luce,

1 Annie Laurie says you are worried about your playing of the part of Curley's wife although from the reviews it appears that you are playing it marvelously. I am deeply grateful to you and to the others in the cast for your feeling about the play. You have surely made it much more than it was by such a feeling.

2 About the girl—I don't know of course what you think about her, but perhaps if I should tell you a little about her as I know her, it might clear your feeling about her. She grew up in an atmosphere of fighting and suspicion. Quite early she learned that she must never trust anyone but she was never able to carry out what she learned. A natural trustfulness broke through constantly and every time it did, she got her. her moral training was most rigid. She was told over and over that she must remain a virgin because that was the only way she could get a husband. This was harped on so often that it became a fixation. It would have been impossible to seduce her. She had only that one thing to sell and she knew it.

3 Now, she was trained by threat not only at home but by other kids. And any show of fear or weakness brought an instant persecution. She learned to be hard to cover her fright. And automatically she became hardest when she was most frightened. She is a nice, kind girl, not a floozy. No man has ever considered her as anything except a girl to try to make. She has never talked to a man except in the sexual fencing conversation. she is not highly sexed particularly but knows instinctively that if she is to be noticed at all, it will be because some one finds her sexually desirable.

Steinbeck, J. (1938). [Letter from John Steinbeck to Claire Luce]. Fullheart Community College. https://www.fullhurst.leicester.sch.uk/_site/data/files/users/CC5CD968868E4057F8E999F1FB603ACD.pdf

4 As to her actual sexual life—she has had none except with Curley and there has probably been no consummation there since Curley would not consider her gratification and would probably be suspicious if she had any. Consequently she is a little starved. She knows utterly nothing about sex except the mass misinformation girls tell one another. If anyone—a man or woman—ever gave her a break—treated her like a person—she would be a slave to that person. Her craving for contact is immense but she, with her background, is incapable of conceiving any contact without some sexual context. With all this--if you knew her, if you could ever break down a thousand little defenses she has built up, you would find a nice person, an honest person, and you would end up by loving her. But such a thing could never happen.

5 I hope you won't think I'm preaching. I've known this girl and I'm just trying to tell you what she is like. She is afraid of everyone in the world. You've known girls like that, haven't you? You can see them in Central Park on a hot night. They travel in groups for protection. They pretend to be wise and hard and voluptuous.

6 I have a feeling that you know all this and that you are doing all this. Please forgive me if I seem to intrude on your job. I don't intend to and I am only writing this because Annie Laurie said you wondered about the girl. It's a devil of a hard part. I am very happy that you have it.

Sincerely,

John Steinbeck

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