

Embraceable

Empowering Facts and True Stories
About Women's Sexuality

By August McLaughlin, Host and
Creator of Girl Boner®

Foreword by Susan Harper, Ph.D.

Copyright © 2015 by August McLaughlin

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise—without the prior written permission of the publisher.

This book is dedicated to every woman who's
ever felt shameful of her sexuality.

You are embraceable.

“August McLaughlin takes on sexuality, body image, depression and female empowerment head on! One part memoir, one part sociological manifesto = something of interest for women of all ages. She hit the nail on the head with this book. Frank personal stories and interviews interspersed throughout the book help us unpack our personal inner conflicts that when unexamined suck the joy out of the female experience.” — Cheryl Grant M.A., M.F.T., psychotherapist

“August opens up and tells all on how to embrace sexuality with the vulnerability and courage I’ve come to expect from a woman who wants every woman to know the power of her own proverbial girl boner to own her sexuality. I often see and feel compelled to say that far too many women have foreclosed on their imagination to what’s possible for them sexually. Let this book give women back their imagination and ownership of their sexual story to write the one that truly lets them know, feel and experience the level of pleasure and connection their hearts most desire.” — Megan Fleming, Ph.D.

“Delivered with the same wit and charm that made her *Girl Boner*® radio series a hit, August McLaughlin’s *Embraceable* is a provocative and poignant meditation on learning to love you.

Here are women’s stories from all walks of life, age, and compulsion, and they are eye-openers: from erotic to kinky, and from humorous to heart-breaking. It is with unflinching honesty that McLaughlin pulls us into her own story, which is both a parable and an indictment of societal perceptions of perfection.

Like Shere Hite, Erica Jong and Nancy Friday, McLaughlin’s work is notable not just for women, but for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of their sexual and spiritual self. *Embraceable* is just that.” — M.G. Miller

Cautionary note:

This book contains explicit sexual material and brief descriptions of sexual violence.

Privacy note:

All of the stories included in this book are true to the best of the authors' and interviewees' memories. In some cases, minor details, such as names, have been changed to preserve anonymity.

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| Foreword..... | 1 |
| Everything You Need To Know About Female* Sexuality.. | 4 |
| About Embraceable..... | 5 |
| Sex Versus Sexuality..... | 5 |
| The Orgasm That Changed My Life | 7 |
| “What About Girl Boners?” | 17 |
| Anorexia and Learning to Love Myself..... | 21 |
| What We Do (and Don’t) Learn in Sex Ed | 43 |
| The Sexy Seeds We’re Lacking | 43 |
| The Sensual Side of Sears..... | 46 |
| Hippy Fervor..... | 47 |
| Abstinence, Pleasure and Porn-ucation..... | 48 |
| ASEXUALITY | 51 |
| Challenging the Hierarchical View of Love: Being Asexual in a Monosexist Society | 53 |
| Coming Out | 55 |
| Busting Out of the Closet: Becoming a Badass Asexual Feminist Activist..... | 60 |
| PORN PROBLEMS AND SHAME | 64 |
| How I Got Hooked On Shame | 67 |
| SEX TOYS AND SELF-STIMULATION | 73 |
| Made for Sex..... | 75 |
| KINK AND BDSM..... | 86 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| A Suburban Girl Becomes a Sexually Free Woman | 88 |
| A Hostile Sexual Culture | 89 |
| Adulthood Without Sexual Wisdom | 91 |
| Permission to Start Over, Learn and Grow | 93 |
| Ongoing Research, Adventure and Activism..... | 96 |
| SEX AND RELIGION | 99 |
| Sex and the Sanctuary | 100 |
| “SLUT”-SHAMING | 131 |
| “Slut”: a Strong Loving Unbroken Treasure | 133 |
| Sexual Bullying and the Swing Set..... | 141 |
| BODY IMAGE | 151 |
| Alchemy of Self..... | 152 |
| Thoughts from The Wrong Side of Breast Cancer..... | 160 |
| Divorce and Burlesque | 165 |
| SEXUAL ASSAULT..... | 176 |
| We Did Nothing Wrong..... | 177 |
| How Butterfly Found Her Wings | 182 |
| A PARTNER’S SEX ADDICTION | 190 |
| Waking Up with a Stranger: My Sex-Addicted Spouse and the Morning(s) After | 192 |
| SEX AND MOTHERHOOD..... | 207 |
| Motherhood Happened | 209 |
| Midlife and Beyond | 219 |
| Forty-Something and Frisky | 221 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Sex after Sixty..... | 228 |
| Women's Battle to Make History..... | 234 |
| Moving Forward: Embracing Your Full Self..... | 241 |
| About the Author | 243 |
| Acknowledgements..... | 244 |
| Resources and Recommended Reading..... | 245 |

Foreword

by Susan Harper, Ph.D.

As a sexuality educator and professor, I have seen time and again the profound ignorance young women (and not-so-young women) possess about their bodies, their sexuality and even their reproductive biology and physiology. Even more heartbreaking: they do not seem to know what they do not know. They come to my classroom with stories of pain, of violence and of shame born of that ignorance and reinforced by the culture of silence around female sexuality.

In over a decade of teaching courses in Anthropology, Sociology, Women's and Gender Studies and Sexuality Studies, I have had more young women than I can count—of every race, every class, every sexual orientation, every body size, every gender presentation—tell me that my classroom is the first place where they ever felt they could ask questions about sexuality and sex and receive an honest answer. These young women had been sexually active for years, sometimes a decade or more, before walking into classroom. Some are mothers; the overwhelming majority are survivors of some sort of sexual violence,

either as children or as young women or—sadly—over their lifespan, as the result of multiple incidents of violence, abuse and assault. Almost all are products of public school systems that mandate abstinence-only “sex education”—which is no sex education at all, of course. They come to me with stories they have never told anyone before, have never felt able to tell anyone before, and they share them with me and with their classmates.

We have a saying in my family: “Monsters live in the dark.” It is only when we shine light into the darkest corners and expose what is hidden by dark and shame and silence, that we can chase the monsters away. The silencing of women’s stories about our own sexuality, our own bodies and our most intimate lives and selves, are among the greatest sources of wounding in the world today. When we tell our stories, we turn on the light.

By owning her own story and encouraging the women in this volume to tell their stories, without shame and without judgment, August McLaughlin has created a valuable tool for healing, education and social change. I truly believe that this book has the potential to change lives, because it lets women know that they are not alone, that they are not abnormal and that they need not be frightened or ashamed of themselves as sexual and sensual beings. Sometimes the most healing sentence anyone can speak is, “Me, too.” This book is filled with powerful “me, too”-s.

Jewish-American feminist poet Muriel Rukeyser famously posed the question, “What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world

would split open.” The stories in *Embraceable*—stories of discovering sexuality, of confronting shame, of joy, pain and ecstasy, and everything in between—have the potential to split the world open, indeed. And it is a world that needs splitting open, a silence that needs shattering, because, as two of my favorite poets—Rumi and Leonard Cohen—remind us, the cracks are where the light gets in. Where there is light, there can be no monsters.

Let us step into the light together. Let us tell our stories. Let the stories in this book empower us to speak, even when our voices shake. Let us split open the world and make a new one in the light that comes in through the cracks.

Susan Harper is an educator, writer, activist and advocate in Irving, Texas. She holds an M.A. and Ph.D. in Anthropology from Southern Methodist University, where her work focused on the intersections of gender identity and religion. She also holds a Graduate Certificate in Women's Studies from Texas Woman's University. Harper teaches courses in Anthropology, Sociology, Women's Studies and LGBTQ Studies at various colleges and universities in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. In addition, she is an activist and advocate for a number of social justice causes, including LGBTQ equality, gender equality, partner and sexual violence prevention and healthcare equality. She has presented numerous workshops and courses on LGBTQ equality issues in venues as diverse as corporate environments and academic conferences.

Everything You Need To Know About Female* Sexuality

I know what some of you are thinking: “*Everything I need to know about my sexuality, in one chapter?*” Yep. Actually, I can provide that in one paragraph. Here goes:

From the moment you exist, your sexuality is your own. It's worth nurturing, celebrating and exploring as you see fit throughout your life and is never, *ever* shame-worthy—regardless of what you've learned elsewhere.

The end.

Actually that's the beginning—not only of this book, but of your journey to sexual self-embrace and discovery. Once you've acknowledged these facts, you can begin to heal most any wound. Better yet, you can start living more fully, authentically and passionately. Even if none of this is news to you (yay, you!), extensive personal and professional experience in the field of women's sexuality and empowerment

have taught me that most of us can stand to learn more.

*When I say *female* sexuality it's because our sexuality is lifelong; it doesn't start in adulthood.

About Embraceable

In this part-memoir, part-anthology, I'll share my own journey to sexual empowerment, from endlessly curious Minnesota girl to international model turned anorexia survivor to my life today as a health and sexuality writer and host and creator of Girl Boner®. I'll highlight some of the most common myths that keep countless women from embracing their sexuality, guiding with relevant research findings and some historical perspective. Perhaps most importantly, I'll share stories of other women, ages twenty-something to eighty-something, who are living proof that sexual embracement is possible and worthy.

Sex Versus Sexuality

First, an important distinction: *Sex and sexuality aren't the same thing*. Sex is an act you engage in by yourself or with another and/or others. Sexuality, which is innate, includes your gender, sexual orientation and sex-related impulses and desires, how you relate intimately with yourself, others, and, arguably, the world. It's in your essence, your spirit, your soul.

While you won't discover everything you need to know about sex in this book, my hope is that you will gain understanding of sexuality—particularly your

own. With that under your belt (pun embraced!), you can cultivate the sex life of your dreams—and so much more. Without such understanding, sadly, there will be problems. Trust me, I know...

The Orgasm That Changed My Life

I never imagined that the routine, if somewhat melancholy day, would end in one of the most beautiful and powerful orgasms of my life—the kind that leaves one elated, intoxicated and swimming in grateful tears. Nor had I imagined that one sexual experience could change life as I knew it, leaving me in an enigmatic ocean of *what ifs*. But that is exactly what happened.

I'd recently transitioned from my longtime modeling and acting career to novel-writing and journalism, and my husband of one year was away, working on a commercial—a scenario to which I'd grown accustomed. I'd spent much of the day working on a story, an hour or two walking my deaf American bulldog, a short while tidying our home and cooking the simplest curry I could conjure, and most of the evening trying to lure myself from a hefty case of the blahs. I wasn't depressed; I know, because I've been

there. I just wasn't feeling particularly happy, as though my normally high-voltage light bulb had fizzled to dim. Making matters worse, the lonely gap longed not only to be filled, but coddled and cured by another. I *hated* that I was pining for my husband to be home—that pathetic, needy feeling I liked to think I had matured past. (Missing someone's fine and dandy, but *pinning?* *Ew.*) *You should feel strong and fulfilled*, I told myself, *whole on your own*. Only I wasn't—not that night.

I didn't have a good reason to feel low, other than being someone prone to such lapses. I also lacked the strength and fortitude to pull myself from it. *I should write more and stronger*, I told myself. Getting lost in story was the best medicine I'd found. If writing didn't remove my sadness, it usually lessened or distracted me somewhat from it. But that night, my thoughts were fixated elsewhere.

For the hundredth, or perhaps thousandth time, I wondered why I had seemed happier single. Was I merely insecure? I wondered. I was *definitely* insecure. But was that all?

As though on cue my cell phone buzzed, alerting me to a text message. I leaped for it, hoping it was my husband—a serendipitous *I'm done and coming home early!* message.

Nope.

Hey, babe. You around tonight?

Jeremy... My heart swelled at the thought of him as I stared longingly at the phone. The sexy, successful actor and I had met on one of my first nights out in the Hollywood scene and had shared explosive chemistry.

Had I still been single I would have responded, met up with him and drowned my emptiness in cocktails and conversation until pheromones took over and we ended up naked and entangled in his Hollywood Hills home. But I was married—happily so, and honestly didn't feel the need or desire for someone else. The distraction, escape and release such an interlude would bring, however, I could've used by the truckload.

I entertained the notion for a few moments, more daydream/fantasy style than intention-filled, which only made me feel worse. *So. Fucking. Alone.* I'm pathetic, I reminded myself—Bridget Jones and her diary had nothing on me. *It's too bad I barely ever drink.*

Get over yourself! I thought, hitting 'delete' on Jeremy's message. *You have so much to be grateful for. Count your damn blessings. You'll feel better tomorrow. Just...breathe.*

Hoping for distraction, I flipped the TV on, scrolling through programs that failed to tantalize, then perused Netflix. The automated service suggested—I'm not kidding—*Diary of a Nymphomaniac*. (If there's a God, he/she has a serious sense of humor.) *Hell*, I figured. *Why not?*

Minutes into the Spanish film about a young woman with an intense sex drive, I wondered if there had ever been anyone as masochistic as me. The very raw and real sensual scenes only highlighted my desperation, adding thoughts of *I wish I were sleeping* to the mix—if only to escape the day.

Why didn't my husband struggle with such yearning when I was away? At least, he never seemed to—and being the ~~nosey~~ inquisitive type, I'd certainly asked. Perhaps my collective year and a half of singlehood and sexual exploration hadn't been enough. His sexual history was far more diverse than mine, after all, having been an established musician and fifteen years my senior. His confidence and experience were evident in his every move between the sheets—and I gratefully benefited. While some of that could have derived from natural forte and perhaps our mutual chemistry, I imagined that he'd learned a heck of a lot along the way. So many experiences. So many...women.

Ugh. Was I jealous!?! As if needy hadn't been enough!

I began picturing previous women he'd dated then imagined many more—groupies throwing themselves at him after concerts, erotic film-worthy one-night stands, threesomes in hipster hotels I had no idea if he'd ever partaken in. He must have had countless seductive fans and encounters in his musician days. The guy is hot, and always has been. Oddly, I didn't care who the women were—whether they were cool or gawky, erotic or timid, lovely or plain. I wasn't jealous of his partners, I realized, but of his vast experience that I would never have.

The more I pondered my husband's sex life, the more I craved him and his body, to relish every escapade he'd ever had. I wanted him to *show* me, to describe every sensual detail, turn me on (even more) and carry me into erotic ecstasy. In my mind, I played

make-believe clips of him with lovers like a rock star porn film, wishing I could edit myself into it.

Damn it! Why couldn't he be here?

My hand moved involuntarily between my legs, a place I had never explored solo. (You read that right. In my thirty years of life, I had never masturbated, and had no idea how uncommon that was.) Through the crotch of my thin cotton pants I felt the heated swell of my pussy, its seemingly unquenchable want. I rubbed it for a frustrated moment, wishing like hell I knew how to make myself come. But rubbing—the most I'd tried—had never done a thing for me, not without a firm penis tucked inside me. *A firm penis. If only...*

Wait. The toy!

The epiphany replaced my angst with giddy curiosity. As a gag wedding gift, a girlfriend of mine had given us a dildo set. We hadn't used it but, enticed by the thought, had stashed it away under the heading of "maybe someday." If I couldn't have a hard cock of flesh, a prosthetic seemed like the next best thing. What was the harm in trying?

Feeling like a nervous teenager, I raced to the closet and pulled the sex toy kit from the wooden chest where we'd stored it. Rifling through layers of quilts and sweaters, my hand fell on the firm package. Simply touching it added vigor to my want and a happy curve to my lips.

I pulled the kit out then removed its casing, staring at the dildo in awe. The hot pink plastic penis glowed in the dark, given preemptive light exposure, but no way would I waste time waiting. Besides, where it was going was lit up plenty already.

I climbed onto the bed, clutching the toy like newfound treasure. As I peeled away my clothing, I glimpsed my reflection in the wall mirror. Blush crept up my neck and into my cheeks, as though I'd been lost in passionate kisses. Salivating, I watched my chest move up and down, marking labored breathing. My back arched involuntarily, pushing my rear outward in kitty-like play. Everything about me seemed to have gone from frumpy and sad to titillating and turned on. If I could've kissed myself, lips on lips, twin tongues exploring, I would have. I wasn't attracted to myself, but to how it felt and appeared to be so gloriously aroused. I couldn't recall the last time I'd felt so uninhibited and alive.

Wishing I had a man—any man, *my* man—there to push up against, envelop and ride, I said *screw it*. Then “screw,” I did. When I pressed the tip of the dildo to my clitoris, chills rushed over my skin. I was wet, really wet, and visibly swollen. In the mirror I could see my vaginal lips bulging outward, like fiery rosebuds blooming. I slid the toy inside me, moaning as delight spread through my body. I was making love to no one, in midair. Sublime.

Overwhelmed by the need to grab onto someone or something, I piled two pillows on top of each other and straddled them. I rocked to and fro on Mr. Pillow, the dildo like a ready-to-launch rocket inside of me, my urge to climax so strong I could barely breathe. Within minutes it happened, the thing I'd never deemed myself capable of. Pleasure shot through every cell in my body, so hard that I released an

uncontrollable wail. Then I crumpled to the bed, tears flooding my cheeks. *I did it*, I thought. *I really did it*.

I had made myself come. I'd masturbated.

Desperate to share the enlightening experience with someone, I phoned my husband. "Oh my God. That's... Um, wow! That's amazing, baby," he said, laughing in a tickled way, awed appreciation evident in his "I'm at work" tone. (That conversation would go down as one of our favorites of all time.)

That night, I struggled to sleep. Amid my euphoric, nearly intoxicated state, my thoughts swirled back through my youth and early adulthood—so many years, sans masturbation. How would my life have been different had I learned the art of self-stimulation and pleasure years ago? Profoundly, I deduced; no question about it.

I recalled my high school boyfriend and first sex partner, Max. By that time, it had been ingrained in me that people were to be in love and, more importantly, married, before having intercourse. I wasn't even terribly attracted to Max when we'd met, but he had taken an interest in me—for reasons I couldn't fathom—and I was intrigued. Once our relationship grew physical, I developed a sincere fondness. Now, I wondered, for what? We'd broken up countless times, only to end up back together, caught up in a make-up sex marathon. Loved ones had told me numerous times that Max seemed controlling. Had he been?

From my first time on, sex had seemed like necessary medicine, a way to release the tension in my body and brain, to help me think and feel more

clearly—even before I'd overcome long-standing body image and self-esteem problems (though granted, for years I refused to make love with the lights on). I recalled the many times I had struggled to focus in classes throughout adolescence, not because of sexual cravings, but what I'd called "brain fog." Meanwhile, I obsessed over boys, whether or not they might find me attractive, assuming they most certainly did not. What if I'd masturbated then? Would sun have shone through the fog, even somewhat? Would I have had a taste of the relaxation and empowerment I had now? Feel less lonely? Less desperate? More complete?

I considered my relationship history, what my mother has jokingly compared to "a very interesting movie." Throughout my twenties I'd tried to remain single, each stint ending in a hormonally charged new beginning with Mr. Seemed-Right. I leaped from one serious relationship to another, most ending in a tumultuous breakup. Within each partnership, I seemed to lose valuable parts of myself. Only afterward, in my brief stints of singleness, did some level of empowerment find me. Like mirrors, I'd attracted guys as insecure as I was or who thrived on my deficiencies. Would I have forged so many relationships if I'd been inclined to address my sexual urges myself? Certainly masturbation wasn't a substitute for intimate relationships. Even as a rookie, that was clear. Regardless, I sensed multitudinous benefits.

The only time I hadn't craved sex and sought it somewhat frequently from a partner took place when I was modeling in Europe in my late teens. There, my

unaddressed depression had transformed into anorexia—a disease that robs the sufferer of her femininity, every curve and sexual want, and one that nearly took my life. Would all of *that* have happened had I been more connected with myself sexually? More than likely, yes. Still, I sensed a significant correlation.

More questions accumulated in my mind like flakes in a dizzy snow globe: Where had my sexuality began? At birth? With menstruation? (I flashed back to my mom's "*You're a woman now...*" speech, which I had stomped away from, refusing to listen.) With Max? Losing my virginity? It certainly hadn't started in sex ed class. From where had my beliefs about my sexual behaviors and capabilities derived?

I thought of my grandmother, who taught me early on that everything "down there" is "private," and shouldn't be touched by anyone—not even me. Of my grandfather, a pastor, who had sexually, physically and emotionally abused my mother. Of the twist of fate that saved me from the same. Of the decades I'd spent loathing my body's shape and appearance. Of the major depression and poor body image both I and my mother had endured. Of the lingering insecurities I hadn't been able to shake or make a dent in, even with years of internal self-work and strengthening. Of my loving husband, who embraced me, quirks and all.

I looked down at my naked body that night, trembling, pink and post-coital, and saw for perhaps the first time the precious castle I'd been living in, yet had long neglected. Making love with myself dusted off a layer of dislike, revealing authenticity, inner

beauty and potential. My sparse tears turned into soft weeping as it hit me: here I was at age thirty, finally learning to fully love my body and by extension, myself.

That night opened my eyes to what I'd been missing for decades, which went far beyond masturbation. It began to dawn on me that embracing our sexuality and capacity for pleasure can be as crucial to living a full, healthy life as eating a balanced diet and getting sufficient nightly sleep. How can we live sensuous lives if we don't embrace our sensuality and all that it stands for, or if we buy into damaging sex-related myths (of which, I'd learn, there are too many)? How many of the negative notions about female sexuality were invalid? Do we really desire or value sex less than men? Guys are expected to masturbate; why aren't we, damn it? Were other women grappling with similar struggles and epiphanies? Surely I wasn't a sole case—or even close, I imagined. How would all of our lives differ if women were encouraged to celebrate and explore their sexuality?

To answer these questions, I put my research cap on—not for the sake of articles or novels I was working on for once, but to make sense of my own journey and existence. If there was one thing I'd learned by then, it was that digging deeper and gaining understanding of oneself are keys to emotional fulfillment. Little did I know then that through my investigation, which would require me to revisit some incredibly dark times in my life, I would discover what I now believe to be my life's purpose.

What began as a personal quest for answers quickly turned into a far-reaching mission. After applying for a trademark for my favorite term, Girl Boner®, I began blogging about female sexuality, starting with my memories of elementary school sex ed—memories far too many folks relate to.

“What About Girl Boners?”

It all started in the early 1990s. My family had recently moved from St. Paul, Minnesota to suburban New Brighton. The less than fifteen miles distance felt more like continents, not only because my driving capabilities were limited to a sparkly violet bike. When my family welcomed the safety of the suburbs, we bid farewell to racial and economic diversity.

The day I entered school as the “new kid,” I felt a wave of *déjà vu*. It was eerily reminiscent of *The Stepford Wives*, the film about mechanical wives that I wasn’t supposed to have watched once, much less repeatedly. My previous school was 25 percent Caucasian. Here in New Brighton, nearly every fourth-grade classmate could have passed as my sibling. A few could have passed as clones. It freaked me out, but not as much as my teacher.

Ms. Cloke, nicknamed “Ms. Croak” for her frog-like tone that I’d later learn sounded more like Julia Child, was known as the strictest teacher in the school. Sex tutorials from anyone at that age made most of us squirm. Sex talk from a harsh, human frog? Even worse. Admittedly, I was eager. I found anything taboo

tantalizing, and the one taboo *no one* spoke of in my circles was sex.

I pretended to be totally grossed out like the other kids as we filed into sex ed. In reality, I was curious and the slightest bit anxious. What in the world would we learn? I knew that the man put his penis in a woman's privates. That was sex. And I'd been told that if a couple prayed about it and God said yes, *presto!* A baby would form in the woman's belly. (For that very reason, I'd long feared that if I so much as thought of a baby, the Great Creator would wave his ethereal wand: fetus, *entrés* belly. Every stomach ache freaked me out.) What else *was* there?

A lot, apparently.

Ms. Cloke hit the button on the projector then stood beside it with her pointer stick, her round silhouette and spirally gray hair encased in an electronic glow.

"Today, class," she began, "we are going to talk about sex."

Soft snickering rippled through the classroom as numerous sets of eyes dropped to the floor. Her words blurred together like the teacher's voice on Charlie Brown (*wah-WAH-wah-WAH-wah*) as she explained the basic anatomy of the male and female sexual organs. Each time she mentioned words like 'penis' or 'vagina,' more giggles resounded. When Tommy, the perpetual troublemaker seated beside me, laughed too loudly, she tapped her stick on the desk, drawing us all to full attention. The stick tap was never good. If she started calling out names—or worse, writing them on the board—serious trouble. Her croaky voice had a

remarkable way of swelling as blood filled her trembling, angry face—a volcano soon to erupt. As funny as many of us found the whole thing, nothing was worth Mount Cloke-suvious.

One slide would stay planted in my brain for years. With another click, a diagram of a man facing sideways appeared. From his groin stretched his penis—as solid and assertive-seeming as Ms. Cloke’s stick. (I would never look at that stick the same way.) I recall having two thoughts: *You could hang a backpack on that thing!* And: *Does it hurt?*

“When a male is sexually aroused, he has an erection,” she said of the saluting penis. Funny, it was nearly pointed at the classroom flag. Rather than hum *Ode to Joy* or recite the Pledge of Allegiance, I honed in.

“And for the male,” she added, “this often feels quite good.”

That feels...good? I tried to imagine any part of my body hardening and protruding outward. How could that possibly feel pleasurable?

Then another thought filled me with anticipation. If that happened to boys, I wondered, what felt “quite good” for girls?

I waited, absorbing her every word, blocking out the sounds and movements of my laugh-stifling peers. I waited, and waited, and...waited.

Finally, just when I’d nearly given up hope of learning the answer that day, a slide featured a woman. *Thank goodness*, I thought, filling with hope. *Here it comes...*

A moment later, I deflated. *Maxi-pads. Tampons. Menstruation.* This couldn't be right. Boys' bodies made like Transformers, jutting outward and feeling grand while we girls spent one-quarter of much of our lives *bleeding* and having *cramps*?

Perhaps if I'd been back in St. Paul with my favorite teacher, Mrs. Webster, I would have asked. But I didn't dare speak up before Ms. Cloke. Maybe she was saving girlie good stuff for another day, I told myself, my gut in instinctual disagreement. Even if pleasure were somehow a part of this whole "becoming a woman" deal, I wasn't sure it could ever compensate for that disgusting blood. I imagined myself in gym class, wearing white shorts, blood spurting from my crotch like Niagara Falls.

I totally hate this, I recall thinking. It all seemed so unfair.

For the rest of fourth grade sex ed and similar courses over subsequent years, I stayed tuned for information I'd find empowering. To my deep dismay, female sexual pleasure was not explored.

One day in the schoolyard during recess, I heard boys talking about "boners." The moment I gained understanding, I wondered, "What about girl boners?"

It would be years before I'd have an answer. In the meantime, my life grew rocky, and whether female erections existed or not became the least of my concerns.

Anorexia and Learning to Love Myself

Puberty set in like rolling fog foreshadowing storms. I increasingly struggled to think straight during classes I'd previously delighted and excelled in, fixated on boys I wished would like me, and fought the horrifying changes in my physique. Seemingly overnight, hair appeared above my vagina and in my armpits. My nipples poked outward, making tiny tents in my shirts, inspiring a vow: *I'll never wear thin cotton turtlenecks again.* I could feel myself expanding more rapidly than my breasts, my body dislike swelling to full-fledged disgust. When my pee came out red, I braced myself for the C-word. ("I'm so sorry, you guys," I imagined telling my parents. "It's been real.") It didn't even dawn on me that I was menstruating; no one told me it would feel or look like that. When I learned that I *was* menstruating—and "a woman now," said my mom—my heart broke as though I did have cancer.

What's happening to me? I don't want to change!

Where was the bubbly girl I used to be? The one who, even though she considered herself chubby, cherished her appetite for food and for life? Who giggled and sang far more than she fought tears? For whom every day was an adventure, rather than a chore? I felt trapped and alone inside a body that hated me and utterly misunderstood by the world. I told almost no one how fat and disgusting I felt, partly because I didn't want anyone to worry; I sensed that the feelings couldn't have been healthy or good. A

small part of me also hoped and prayed that I was wrong.

I began wearing my mother's oversized shirts, attempting to hide my marshmallowy body, and tight shirts underneath to keep my protruding breasts as flat as possible. During the seventh grade, I attempted my first diet: my self-concocted "one meal a day" plan, without a single day of success. Starving all day led me to overeat in the evening, and my attempts at exercise remained futile. I felt like a failure.

Then, something remarkable happened. At church one night while my youth pastor was hanging a photo of me she'd taken for the class wall, she said, "Wow. You look like a model!"

A model? Was she blind? Delight sprinkled through my body as though I'd won a grand trophy. Even if she was simply being nice, I felt validated, as though I *was* somebody.

Gradually, others began making similar remarks: my high school theater director, friends' parents and finally (cue trumpets)—A *BOY!* After a community theater play rehearsal, fellow cast mate Max said, "My god, you're beautiful." Blushing and clueless about how to react, I turned away. I should marry him, I told myself. I couldn't believe he found me pretty. *Someday I'll be incredibly fat and ugly*, my thoughts whispered—*make that uglier*; I wondered if he'd desire my attention and company then.

People routinely told me I was photogenic, which I perceived as being less attractive in person than on film, and I was certain they only meant my face. Maybe I'd be a face model. Was there even such thing?

Midway through high school, I spotted a newspaper ad for test shots at a modeling agency in downtown Minneapolis. My heart aflutter, I called to inquire. I needed head shots for theater anyway, I reasoned, not wanting to disclose to anyone my interest in modeling as a career. After I canceled several appointments, Max encouraged me to go.

I was terrified, entering the tall, brick building on NE Fourth Street. Having tried on at least twenty outfits, I'd settled on torn jeans and a loose-fitting blue shirt that matched my eyes. Catching my reflection in the metallic elevator wall as I rode up to the studio, I wondered what the hell I was thinking. "You look awful!" my thoughts screamed. "Go home!" The elevator stopped. I was about to hit the "down" button when a man with beaded dreadlocks and a million dollar smile greeted me. "Hey, are you here for the shoot?" Even his voice sounded hip.

"Yeah," I uttered, and stepped off.

I followed him to a studio that did not look like anything "Minnesotan" I'd ever known. Soft club music streamed from the speakers as a disco ball twirled in the air in midday light. On a bright orange, vintage sofa sat two tall, lanky models puffing cigarettes and flipping through their portfolios. The photos on the walls looked as though they'd emerged from *Vogue* fashion spreads; perhaps they had. In the corner before a bright white wall stood lights and a camera. As anxious as I was, that area captivated me.

Another hip man wearing skintight jeans and a vintage tee did my hair and makeup, his face so close to mine I could feel his breath. In a place like

Minnesota, where one's privacy bubble is about three feet, that alone felt surreal. Only Max and my dentist had loomed so close in recent years.

"Have you always wanted to be a model?" he asked.

I flashed a nervous smile. "Maybe. I don't know."

I fell into a sort of meditative state as he continued working on my face, relieved to have someone else taking care of my appearance, and my only responsibility sitting fairly still. The fact that I could do so with ease illustrated how much I wanted to be there.

"Ow!" A stinging pain snapped me from my daydream haze.

He laughed. "Haven't you had your eyebrows tweezed before?"

Uh...no. He continued his work, muttering praise and guidance: "Wow. Gorgeous. Okay, and...look that way...and...Yes!" He finished and had me slip into a black velvet dress then stand before a wall mirror. I had no idea how to assess my reflection. The woman I saw didn't look like me, but I couldn't tell if she was attractive. I didn't want to look at her, particularly not with others watching me, so I politely agreed when they rhetorically asked if I thought I looked "amazing," then slipped over to the camera area.

There, "camera magic" took on a whole new meaning. Gazing into the lens I grew to perceive as my beloved black hole, I felt powerful. Beautiful. Unstoppable. Important. With each click of the camera, I shifted positions subtly, responding to the photographer's cues as though I knew precisely what

to do. Some part of me must have—perhaps it was instinctual. Or maybe I'd been dreaming of this experience for years, mentally preparing to emulate the models I'd seen in magazines and strutting down runways without realizing it. To me, they signified beauty, grace and success I could never possess. Whatever the reason, I was smitten. While it would be years before I'd tell anyone, particularly with any amount of ease, I became a model that day. I was sixteen going on wonderful, and finally the cobwebs in my spirits showed a clearing.

When the agency called me in to look at my photos, they offered to represent me. I kept waiting for the “but you'll have to lose weight.” By some miracle, it never came. I left clutching a book that would soon hold my photographs, wondering seriously for the first time if my self-perceptions had been wrong, that I wasn't chubby or unattractive—at least not in print.

Over the next several weeks I had more test shoots, trading my modeling skills and appearance for photos to fill my book. I think of those gleeful weeks often, when my hope and excitement were so lively, and my concern over my perceived ugliness, for once, dim. Then reality set in.

A well-known photographer had flown in from Los Angeles to shoot me and a few other girls. After a long day of shooting, giving my all for the camera and relishing his approval, he stopped, lowered his camera, looked into my eyes and said, “You know, you could be working in Paris...” (*OH MY GOD. Did he say Paris?*) “...if you lost 10 or 15 pounds.”

My heart dropped a few stories. I had been right all along.

After consulting with my agents, who gently agreed with the photographer's assessment but told me to be careful, my hope returned. I now had not only validation, but a legitimate reason to lose weight. I would do it healthfully—for my career, I told myself. I began working out with a trainer who sold me meal replacement shakes and supplements. While I struggled every step of the way, hating the exercise, the hunger and the chalky, foul-tasting shakes, I was determined. Gradually, the pin on the scale began to dip down. The first time I noticed a decline, I shed happy tears. I again felt like somebody. Somebody capable and worthy.

I modeled for local publications and designers for the remainder of high school, telling few people what I was actually doing (more often claiming “babysitting”), fearing that if they found out they'd think me vain, or find the notion of someone as unattractive as me modeling unfathomable. Only before cameras, stepping into my confident alter-ego, did I feel beautiful.

Shortly after graduation, I was offered a contract to model in New York with the prestigious Wilhelmina Models. By then, my love affair with the cameras had only grown, as had my desire to move away from all things familiar. I broke up with Max, packed my life up in a suitcase and headed to Manhattan. *Someday I really will be modeling in Paris*, I wrote in my journal. No matter what the cost.

One might think that my life was as sexy as any young woman's could be back then—traveling to the world's most glamorous cities, making ridiculous amounts of money for playing dress-up, serving as the canvas and metaphorical clay for esteemed makeup artists, stylists and photographers. I loved much of my life as a model, and still recall many parts fondly. But *sexy*? That's the least likely descriptor I'd use.

Looking back, many models I knew seemed as deeply insecure as I was, though aside from their drug habits, I found them all to be insanely cool and intimidating. My full-time modeling years were my least active sexually, and the only sex any of my roommates seemed to occasionally have was drunken, lashing out or “I want him to want me” desperate type. One model I knew often spoke of the jobs she “fucked” her way into landing. There was no intimacy in our lives, not physically or emotionally. And although I considered myself the healthiest in my circles (at least I slept, exercised and ate fruit), that wasn't saying much. Looking back, it's obvious: we all had eating disorders.

My efforts to stay slim and thrive professionally soon became my everything. I'd lost a few pounds beyond the initial fifteen upon moving to New York, namely because I was terrified of the psycho killers and rats I feared riding the subways at first, instead walking countless miles in addition to my daily gym workouts. Regardless of how I shed the pounds, the deficit shone brightly for my career. The thinner I became, the fatter my paychecks and opportunities

seem to grow—and there was no way I'd allow myself to grow larger than my newest pictures.

I worked hard, giving my all at casting calls, photo shoots and runway shows—work for which weight control seemed continually more vital. Gradually, I began accumulating a steady stream of bookings and repeat clients, and for a while, I thought I was happy. Fulfilled. Doing precisely what I was made to do. As time passed, however, the void inside reared its head, reminding me how deeply alone I felt. Rather than controlling my weight, the weight loss fixation controlled me, dictating my every thought and decision. While I wouldn't have stopped trying, given the choice, I could no longer slenderize or exercise my way to happiness. Something was missing.

I'll move, I thought. Images of Italy and Paris circulated my thoughts, sunbeams in my gloom. *There I'd be happy*. I hadn't yet realized that self-ease and fulfillment derive from within, and that no matter how far I ran, I could not escape myself.

One day, while attempting to exercise away the guilt-inducing baked potato I felt sure was too large and caloric for my needs, one of my agents called. An agent from Paris was in town and wanted to meet me, that day. *Now? I look wretched!*

I sobbed at my reflection in the locker room mirror. Why did I have to meet her *that* day? My New York agents hadn't said a word about my shape or size, and Paris, to me, meant everything—so I pulled myself together and headed to the agency.

I'll never forget my booker's words when he saw me, my face still puffy from crying. "Are you getting

fat?” he whispered, glancing down at my waistline. I wanted to slug him. More so, I wanted to slug me. *I work so hard! Why does the fatness keep catching up with me?*

“I’m bloated,” I replied, certain there was far more to it than that.

The Parisian agent sat with her associate on a sofa in the lobby, looking me up and down between glances at my portfolio. Flipping pages, they spoke to each other in French, as though analyzing a painting on the wall and comparing it to designs, imagining it hanging on their own wall, perhaps observing flaws. I was certain they hated me, and stunned to learn the opposite from my New York agent: “They love you, baby. Pack your bags. You leave in three weeks,” he said, then pointed a lazy finger at my abdomen. “And do something about that.”

Over the next few weeks, I brutalized my body with risky pills, excessive workouts and a diet barely sufficient for my childhood pet hamster. When I stepped on the scale days before my flight and saw the lowest number I’d seen to date, some of my anxiety melted away. I felt strong, yet numb. Gone were the days in which weight loss spurred luscious highs, but at least I’d made a dent in my sense of failure.

“I just need to get to Paris,” I kept telling myself. “Then I’ll be okay.”

Relocating to Paris was as far as I had set my sights, my perceivable end goal. Not long after I arrived and began working, I wondered if there was some dark, cosmic reason why.



Sweet Paree. The city of romance and lights. As I made my way through the large tangle of city amid jet lag haze, I felt more alone than ever. Gone were the American diet foods and fitness centers on every corner, the mass cultural fear of fatness and constant efforts to combat it I hadn't even realized I'd found comforting. Even if I had wanted to tabulate calories and fat grams accurately, my inability to comprehend French would've made doing so impossible—so I rounded every estimate up. When you have an eating disorder, less is more, always.

Meanwhile, sex was the farthest thing from my mind. At the end of a shoot one day a gorgeous, charming Frenchman asked me to dinner. While I could have used the company, all I could think was, “But there'd be food.” So I declined. The closest I came to having a remotely sexual thought happened when I ended up on a park bench, sandwiched between two couples, both kissing and cooing at each other. Lovebirds. I observed an emptiness inside me, more like a lack of longing than a longing for intimacy. I namely wished they'd go away. They reminded me of a void I preferred not to think about, or even acknowledge.

What I'd have given to have the intimidating or obnoxious roommates I'd grown accustomed to having in New York model apartments. At least we were united in our neuroses. In Paris, I stuck out and felt like an alien life form. When I went running, people occasionally cheered, assuming that anyone who opted to run so much must've been a professional athlete. I had my own flat, barely large enough to fit a foldout bed and standing wardrobe, which only magnified the solitude that terrified me.

Within weeks, my health took significant turns for the worse. My added efforts to lose weight before leaving the states I'd sworn to myself were temporary carried on. I pushed the limits until the heightened restriction and weight loss measures became my "normal," growing increasingly unable to assess the resultant damage. That's one price of starvation; a malnourished brain can't function. It can, however, tell you lies.

One day while weighing myself at a local gym I felt a rush of panic: How could my weight have dropped so low? The voice in my head assured me that I'd done the math wrong, and halved instead of slightly more than doubling kilograms to make pounds. Later, I would find out I was right the first time.

In photos from that time, I look like a concentration camp victim—bluish gray, bruised, my cheeks sunken in and profound emptiness saturating my seemingly bulging eyes. Starvation-induced edema caused fluid to accumulate in my ankles and my abdomen to protrude, convincing me that I'd not lost,

but gained, plentiful pounds. Overexercise caused my feet to blister, adding blood stains to my shoes.

So horrified by my “fat” legs, the one area of my body that retained some amount of muscle, I chopped them from photographs with a scissors, wishing I could do the same to my flesh. I didn’t know what was wrong with me, at least not consciously, but clearly, something was. One fateful day I’d learn the answers, but not before my troubles nearly swallowed me for good.

The morning that nearly became my last started like any other during my stay in Paris—I awakened woozy, exhausted and determined. Where logic would’ve told me to get some rest, nourish my body and tend to the day’s work responsibilities, the voice blaring inside me commanded I *wake up and run!* Breakfast and the castings, agency meetings and photo shoots I’d once been passionate about would have to wait; my sole priority was the upkeep of my disease.

I slipped my feet into my worn-out, bloodstained sneakers, stepped out of my tiny flat and headed toward the Seine. The Eiffel Tower came into full view over the pastel haze of the sunrise—a living, breathing Monet. *Its beauty could’ve taken a blind man’s breath away*, I wrote in my journal. *I didn’t deserve it.*

The dewy earth squished beneath my feet as I ran to the rhythm of calorie-counting. *Forty-five plus six plus ten...plus five plus ten plus three...* I estimated the previous day’s “damage” then plotted an itinerary of exercise and occasional food bits to compensate. So accustomed to ignoring the dizziness and fatigue

accompanying me, anything else would've felt foreign. But this time was different.

Pushing aside the added sense of off-ness in my gut, I observed the dip in the ground ahead. *It looks like an adult-size cradle*, I thought. Perhaps I knew what was coming.

I ran with increasing dizziness and pain, as though a metal clamp squeezed my brain and fog saturated my lungs. *RUN. Don't stop! You can't.* Tears stung my eyes as I tried to outrun the inevitable, step after step toward the cradle.

A force surged within me, like a stranger stalking me from the inside. I felt a flutter in my chest, heard myself gasp. Black flecks speckled my vision. *Dizzy. So dizzy. Just...keep...going...* I tried to take another step, but my entire body gave. Crumpling, I fell to the ground as though in slow motion and for a brief, savory moment, I felt weightless.

I awoke later, lying in the grassy cradle, the taste of blood and dirt in my mouth. Rather than contemplate how long I had been there or if I'd been hurt, one thought filled me with terror: *Does dirt have calories?*

The thought lingered as I slipped in and out of consciousness, occasionally overshadowed by rational notions: *Am I dying? (Calories...) Is this death? (I'm such a mess!) My family...*

An image of my parents and siblings flashed in my brain, filling me with guilt. If I died, I feared they would never forgive themselves. *It's not your fault!* I whisper-screamed as though my thoughts might reach them. *I love you guys. You have to know that. My*

longing to see them one last time nearly matched my caloric fears—but not quite. Angry, I tried to spit the dirt out, but my brain and body seemed no longer connected. *Listen to me, you piece of SHIT!* Me versus my body; the ongoing war had reached its peak.

My heart fluttered again, this time harder—a wild flap. Then a warmth filled my chest. It spilled down through my body, reaching my toes. I felt as though I was glowing, radiating a sparkly firefly light.

Stand up! I instructed myself. *Try.* Nothing budged. Even if I could stand and walk away, what would be the point? I reasoned. I prodded myself to let go, to simply drift off to sleep and ignore what was happening. Let go of everything—of life. But for reasons I couldn't explain, something inside me said *carry on.*

The light, seeming now to emanate from my chest, remained as I lay in an odd mix of fear and self-preservation. *Fatness. Calories.* The mess of me! *Keep going. There's a reason. Hang on.* My hope, while involuntary, seemed as immovable as my formerly voluntary limbs. I longed for answers, the whys behind my aspirations, yelling angry prayers at God with my thoughts. *Give me something to fight for, damn it. Why is this happening to me?*

I don't recall who found me or how I made it to the medical center, only the words of the British doctor: "You have anorexia. Do you understand what that means? You could've died. You...*could* die."

Her words blurred together like fog on a windshield as my thoughts went wild. *She's crazy! I can't have anorexia. Please don't make me eat...* I felt

neither thin nor “skilled” enough to have a disorder characterized by starvation. Sure, I had problems, the “cancer in my soul” I’d journaled about. I felt physically and emotionally rotted and weak, but couldn’t make sense of anything. I only knew I had to go home.

Back in Minnesota, it took me months of introspection and therapy to accept my diagnosis. Once I did, I fought harder to uphold it; anorexia seemed like the one special thing about me. Without it, what would I have left?

For once my depression proved helpful, a blessing in dark disguise. Desperate to feel found and fulfilled instead of lost and floundering in a calorie-obsessed darkness I called Hell, I gradually began taking much needed steps toward self-care. The problem was, I didn’t actually care, not enough to love or nurture myself purely for the sake of doing so. The steps were mandatory if I ever hoped to feel joy again, and risking my life and even more misery the only alternatives.

While the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel seemed mythical most days, I forged on, living in a perpetual state of shame and anxiety, seeing numbers and failure instead of food on meal plates and fatness in every inch of me, praying that someday I wouldn’t have to try so hard. That’s one of the toughest aspects of eating disorders. The sufferer can look healthy on the outside while she struggles more than ever within.

Like many eating disorder treatment programs, much of my dietary care focused on my weight and calories, only rather than my previous restriction, the

goal was healthy gains. I understand where these strategies derive from: without healthy nutrient and weight increases, people with anorexia die. But maintaining such intense focus on the very elements of one's life that controlled her, yet with an even more daunting outcome (weight gain), seems contradictory to me. Numerous people, including treatment professionals, told me I would always struggle with my illness, that my goal would be a state of perpetual recovery. That wasn't good enough for me.

When one of my worst nightmares came true, however, I feared they were right. In a moment of despair, I gave in to my longing for a single bite of chocolate ice cream. As I placed the dollop of creamy cold sweetness into my mouth, my entire body trembled. I felt intoxicated, a sense of danger, head-to-toe orgasm and temporary relief. But one bite turned into two, then six, then all that remained of the half gallon. The fatty cream sat like a putrid rock in my shrunken stomach. I'd never felt so ashamed.

The bingeing/starving roller coaster that followed was the most excruciating and important occurrence in my recovery. At its worst, I entered what my therapist called a "bulimic trance." The bingeing took over and I had little awareness of all I'd consumed until I found myself sobbing amidst wrappers and crumbs.

As my weight increased, friends and family told me how healthy I looked: "You're filling out so nicely!" The well-intended comment would haunt me for months.

Desperate to stop bingeing, I decided to take my treatment more seriously.

“I will do *anything* to stop this,” I told my therapist.

“Good,” she said. “It starts with eating. After you binge, don’t skip your next meal.”

Anything but that. I resisted her instructions, holding staunchly to the belief that if I were just strong enough, I could attain the thinness I desired and stop bingeing all at once. It sounded Utopian. Meanwhile, I mourned the loss of my anorexia like a lost soul mate.

One night, after a fast ended in a gargantuan binge, I hit a new bottom. I considered gulping the poison I’d used on occasion to vomit, aware of the life-threatening risks. I didn’t *want* to die, but I couldn’t bear life as I knew it. In a fury, I scavenged the house for the tiny bottle. When I couldn’t find it, my heart raced. I struggled to breathe.

Then something remarkable happened. Incapable of purging in any of my viable methods, I calmed down. That calmness, paired with tired frustration and an inability to foresee life continuing as Hell, brought clarity. *Try something new. You have to.*

I walked with trepidation to my wall mirror, as though nearing a fatal cliff. For the first time in too long, I looked not at my hips, belly or thighs, but into my eyes. The head-on stare punctured the swollen balloon of hurt inside me, releasing sobs.

“You can’t live like this anymore!” I told my reflection. “I won’t let you hate yourself so much. This is not who you are.” I didn’t know what I was fighting for, but my instincts said, *Don’t give up.*

My anger at ED and proclamations in the mirror were the first signs of self-love I'd displayed in years, the light switch in the dark cave in which I lived. If I managed to turn it on, I knew my life would change. So rather than plot restriction strategies for the coming days as usual, I began plotting a future free of ED.

The night became a *Good Riddance ED* rampage. I threw my "skinny clothes" and scale in a dumpster and removed the size tags from clothes that fit. I trashed every fashion mag, food journal and diet book, sang my feelings into made-up songs. I vowed to myself that for one year I would not diet, starve or make any other attempts at weight loss. If I gained weight during that year, so be it. The next morning, with trembling hands and tears flooding my cheeks, I ate breakfast, forcing thoughts of *I love you, You deserve this, You're going to be okay*, with every bite.

Determined to manifest joy around food and eating, I began studying food with a velocity I'd only previously applied to treadmills. I wanted to discover its goodness and stop dreaming of ways to avoid it. What did particular foods do for me? If not for managing weight, why did people eat them? How could I eat healthfully, and not by diet book standards of what that was? I began addressing a self-compiled "I'm afraid of" list: Eat in public. Eat at a restaurant, alone. Eat a meal prepared by others without demanding particulars. Eat the ice cream that triggered my first binge, one serving at a time.

I traded my diet books for medical and dietetic texts that defined food as fuel, a necessary means of nutrients, and obtained my first certification in nutrition. I cooked, experimented with foods I'd never tried and volunteered at soup kitchens. I stopped aiming for dietary perfection. Multiple studies had convinced me that this increased my risk for bingeing, obesity, anxiety, depression and sleep problems—pretty much everything on my “No, thank you” list.

It took numerous attempts of arriving at an upscale restaurant alone before I dined there and several more before I enjoyed the food *sans* heavy sweating or heart palpitations. I wept over a homemade candlelit dinner for one, served on my grandmother's china. I stocked my kitchen with food until it felt warm, loved and lived-in. Rather than cold and frightening, it felt like home. I took a Buddhist philosophy course and applied its principles to my meals. Eating slowly and without distraction soon went from mortifying to pacifying. On difficult days, I asked myself what I'd feed a dear friend then treated myself to just that—until gradually, finally, I became her.

By that time, I thought I was cured. I'd said goodbye to and grieved anorexia, made peace with food and was caring for my body in numerous significant ways. Had anyone asked me then if I felt empowered I'd have, without hesitation, yelled, “Yes!” I began speaking for audiences about my eating disorder, singing praises of my newfound recovery with hopes of inspiring self-acceptance in others.

When your body image issues run as long and deep as mine had, every stage in advanced recovery feels as though you've healed; you feel healthier and happier than you perhaps ever have. In my opinion, too many stop there.

No matter how healthy I ate, how much wiggle room I provided myself or how much joy I derived from mindful eating, a disconnect remained between me and my body, so engrained that I scarcely noticed. When my appendix burst on Christmas Day that year, I realized just how removed I'd become. I'd ignored signs of a severe infection my doctor estimated had lingered for weeks, scarcely noticing until the pain grew so intense I couldn't stand or sit up straight.

Finally, I began to make peace with my body, beginning in what may have seemed the least likely of places. Seated in a Psychology of Female Sexuality course, I began to ponder and speak openly about my sexuality for the first time.

"We're going to talk about sex," Professor Rockenstein said on the first day of class. Chills coated my skin as it dawned on me: Had I *ever* talked about sex? Other than a few extremely limited conversations with my then boyfriend—chats like "You know what we're doing, right?" the first time he entered me and my responsive nod—no, I hadn't.

Reflecting on the significant part of my life and body that had laid dormant since my eating disorder set in brought tears and newfound grief over all I'd missed. Anorexia had stolen what remained of my femininity, my sex drive and the countless, essential

advantages of a healthy, gratifying sex life—but the seeds had been planted far earlier.

Had I learned to value my body and sexuality from the get-go, that my vagina, vulva, labia and clitoris weren't forbidden areas to ignore, induce sin and "never touch," as relatives, schooling and religion had instilled, but natural and embraceable, I highly doubt I would have developed intense body shame as a child, slipped into a deep depression during adolescence or developed a near-fatal eating disorder later on. While it would take years of introspection, study and life experience for me to move fully past remaining insecurities, recognizing my lack of sexual empowerment allowed me to gradually claim it. In doing so, I've moved not only beyond my previous weight loss obsessions and body dysmorphia, but into the kind of full, authentic and purposeful life I believe we all deserve.

Women today are taught in countless ways to shun our physicality and sexuality. Portrayals of our bodies and sexuality more suited to hardcore, mainstream porn (which promotes unrealistic, male-centric ideals) are splashed around American media, perpetuating harmful myths and contributing to the epidemics of dieting, obesity, depression and poor body image that run rampant in women. These issues stifle us even more sexually, creating a cyclic Catch-22. So we continue to seek out the diet or pills that will finally work ("I'll be happy/successful/meet Mr./Ms. Right once I lose ___ pounds..."), leading us farther and farther down a self-defeating path.

A growing body of research shows that women are naturally as sexual and desirous as men, yet popular beliefs suggesting the opposite keep many of us from seeking solutions; we can't expect to gain empowerment if we scarcely recognize its absence. Meanwhile, the lack of female sexual embracement is often misinterpreted as a medical problem. Billions of dollars are invested into pharmaceutical treatments for female sexual dysfunction, when in most cases the answers can't be bottled up or sold. No amount of medication can help a woman see beauty in her body and sexuality as they are, the absence of which keeps us from living full, healthy, gratifying lives.

Here's the good news: We already have the solutions to these problems. They lie within us, just waiting to be untapped. Through awareness and shifts in our attitudes and behaviors, we can cultivate positive body image and sexual empowerment, making way for the fulfilling lives we deserve. Having experienced and extensively studied these shifts and consulted with countless industry experts and other women who've accomplished the same, I can assure you that the efforts are supremely worthy and the rewards immense.

Thank you for allowing me and the other women featured in this book to be part of your journey. Together, we can better the world.

What We Do (and Don't) Learn in Sex Ed

The Sexy Seeds We're Lacking

“Withholding information about sex and sexuality will not keep children safe. It will only keep them ignorant.” — Debra Hauser, President of Advocates for Youth.

One of the most touching emails I've received since launching Girl Boner® on my blog came from Sarah T., a thirty-one-year-old graduate student who believes taboos around sexuality and her lack of sound sex education contributed to her battle with bulimia as a teen.

“I'll be a therapist soon and still struggle somewhat to discuss sexuality with loved ones,” she told me. “I'm embarrassed to admit that. It's just wrong.”

Caught masturbating as a preteen, Sarah's mother lectured her on the “dirtiness” of touching her sexual

parts and convinced her that self-stimulation could cause hideous diseases.

“That was the first I’d learned about masturbation,” she said. “Even though I was skeptical, I feared she was right and felt guilty and embarrassed when my urges continued—so I resisted.”

Shortly later, Sarah began fixating on her weight and learned to induce vomiting after what she considered indulgent meals. “I really don’t think I would have developed bulimia if a trusted adult had sat me down and said, ‘Look. These feelings are natural. Your body is a work of art, designed to experience pleasure. Here are some safe and healthy ways you can.’”

While many experts agree that kids should gain sex education from kindergarten on, most girls learn extremely little about sexuality until adolescence, when they’re taught about menstruation, abstinence and sexually transmitted disease. Many of us leave elementary school sex ed fearing disease-laden public toilet seats and pregnancy and mystified by sexual pleasure. If you were lucky, you learned how to put a condom on a banana or became responsible for a fake baby for a few days. More likely, you were encouraged to subtly or assertively “just say no!” Considering the fact that most of our parents had even less access to empowering sexual education while growing up than we do, most of us learn little more at home. Besides, schools take care of it. Right?

Not really. Most modern sex education approaches in the United States range from “avoid sex until marriage” as the only option: contraceptives

don't work and premarital sex is dangerous, to the "disaster prevention" tactic: abstinence is ideal, but if you feel you *must* have sex (i.e., are lured to the "dark side"), here are some ways to avoid early death or pregnancy. Federal funding is available for abstinence-only programs that have the "exclusive purpose of teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity," according to the Social Security Act. Meanwhile, none of the risks associated with such programming, such as poor body image, depressive moods, heightened stress and troubled relationships, are addressed. In *No Second Chances*, a film commonly shown in abstinence-only courses, a student asks a school nurse, "What if I want to have sex before I get married?"

"Well, I guess you'll just have to be prepared to die," the nurse replies. (Is anyone else hearing the theme music to *Jaws* right now?)

During the most vulnerable years in our young lives, when our hormones are raging and our bodies are transforming in all kinds of zany (yet beautiful and natural) ways, pop culture tells us we must look and act a certain way—impossibly lithe yet voluptuous—and "boys will be boys," constantly craving sex, viewing women as sex objects and masturbating often. If a girl desires sex and God forbid talks about it, she's likely to be considered "slutty." If she doesn't "put out" at all, she's deemed a prude. (Meanwhile, many sexually active males are crowned leaders of the macho pack, and guys who don't pursue sex are often considered gay, as if that's negative, or girlie wusses.)

Left unchanged, these negative notions accompany us through adulthood, shaping what we believe about ourselves, our bodies and our sexuality.

If you can relate to all of this as much as I can, you're probably no stranger to the complications. A lack of sexual empowerment is associated with poor body image, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, compulsive dieting, eating disorders, substance abuse, intimacy and trust issues and stunted emotional growth. (How many women do you know who haven't experienced any of these?) Much like stifling our nutrient intake or air supply, stifling our sexuality keeps us from living to our full potential. The most fortunate folks outgrow the pitfalls through experience and self-work—if not fully, then to some degree. In all-too-common severe cases, such suppression ruins lives.

How did we get to this place in our education system? Why don't sex ed programs start early and emphasize, rather than shun, female sexual pleasure? Why do they focus so heavily on fear, risk, and avoidance? Some of the answers lie in the roots of sex ed.

The Sensual Side of Sears

Sex education was invented by progressive reformers Julius Rosenwald, a philanthropist and president of Sears Roebuck, and Charles Eliot, the president of Harvard University, in the early 1900s. Eliot was one of the first “social hygienists”—people who believed that teaching people about “proper use

of sexuality” would help rid the world of sexually transmitted disease, according to Kristen Luker, Berkeley law professor and author of *When Sex Goes to School*. Back then, “proper” sex was to be shared solely between husband and wife. Sex with a prostitute was seen as unfortunate but often necessary for men, because of their uncontrollable “needs.” (Apparently women’s needs hadn’t yet been invented—well, one would think.)

Hippy Fervor

During the 1960s and ’70s, feminism and general social rebellion took flight—*SEX, drugs and rock ‘n roll!* Millions of young adults fought the notion that sex should be limited to marriage and should instead be celebrated in a positive, love-filled light. (I would’ve made a fabulous hippie. *Sigh...*) Around the same time, the Unitarian Universalist Association started the first “sex-positive” curriculum. (Finally!) The coursework moved sex ed major steps forward by focusing on nonjudgmental instruction about bodies, birth control and disease prevention. While masturbation and sexual pleasure remained largely MIA, the program did some good by suggesting that sexual pleasure and urges aren’t necessarily bad. It promoted healthy partnerships, encouraging teens and young adults to make responsible choices regarding sexuality—which could optionally include having (gasp!) sex.

If only all of that had lasted and evolved...

Abstinence, Pleasure and Porn-ucation

During the 1980s, nationwide concern over the HIV/AIDS epidemic brought significant change in sex education and public views about sexuality. By the decade's end, opinions on sex ed were vastly divided, many Americans believing in a broader definition and exploration of sexuality from adolescence on, others promoting the "avoid until marriage" philosophy. The controversy brought the word "abstinence" into the sex ed equation for the first time. Since then, the avoid-sex-at-all-costs approach has been winning in sexual curricula with marked force.

Abstinence may be a sure way of avoiding pregnancy and STDs, and certainly teaching the importance of *safe* sex is important, but preaching sex avoidance to teenagers? I can think of at least a hundred wiser uses of class time. Telling a teen with raging hormones to never think about or pursue sex is like leaving a hungry child alone in a room with a plate of fresh-baked cookies and saying, "Don't eat!" (And yes, girls have intense sexual urges, just as boys do—only generally with more shame or less awareness.) Encouraging abstinence also often discourages sexual confidence, suggesting that anything sex-related, unless you're heterosexual, married and planning to procreate, including our bodies, desires and capacity for pleasure, is negative.

We also know that abstinence-focused programs don't serve their intended purposes. Studies evaluating the programs have shown that they are ineffective at preventing unwanted pregnancies and

the spread of sexually transmitted illness, and they do nothing to minimize HIV risk, according to a 2009 report published in *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*. It's not surprising that we now have one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in the world or that one in four American teens acquires an STD each year. Nearly half of high school teens in the United States had sex in 2011, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 40 percent of whom reportedly did not use protection the most recent time.

In addition to being ineffective in safeguarding kids' health or preventing early pregnancy, programs that focus on abstinence and STDs leave kids endlessly curious. If they're told, "Don't do it!" how can they possibly feel comfortable asking questions like, "If I do it, what will it feel like?" or "How can I stimulate my own orgasm?"—which happens to be a surefire way of inviting the benefits of healthy sexuality and body image without raising risks for disease or pregnancy.

So where does all of this and society's mixed messages leave us? While there are some exceptions, most women who end up finding sexual empowerment cultivate it on their own. The road there isn't often easy, but the efforts are 1000 percent worthwhile.



“Love is something everyone deserves. I love and am loved. I am not broken. I am not missing out on anything and I’m certainly not alone.” — Lauren Jankowski



ASEXUALITY

Based on what I've heard people say about asexuality, I'm guessing that some of you are wondering why in the world I would start the story collection with a topic that means "without sexuality." *Isn't that the opposite of sexuality? No. Doesn't it mean, choosing not to be sexual?* Still nope. Asexuality is a sexual identity, an orientation—and it's just as embraceable as the others.

Simply put, an asexual person is someone who doesn't experience sexual attraction. They may still crave intimate, romantic attachments to others, or not. They may experience some level of sexual arousal, though without any desire to act on it with a partner. Or, they may never experience arousal at all. (And that's perfectly okay; we don't *need* to feel aroused to lead healthy, happy lives.) From an emotional standpoint, asexual folks have needs like everyone else—the need to feel and experience love, acceptance

and compassion from others, to lead fulfilling lives without being judged or ridiculed.

Asexuality is not a choice one makes after a massive breakup or decision to hide one's "real" sexual identity, such as being *gay*. It's not synonymous with celibacy, though many asexuals end up not engaging in sex at all. Others, devastatingly, are pressured into having sexual experiences as a "cure," or worse, raped as a means of fixing what's—*not actually*—broken.

The widespread ignorance and derivative shame asexual people are prone to make Lauren Jankowski's story and advocacy so incredibly important. I've learned a great deal from this writer and suspect you will, too.

Challenging the Hierarchical View of Love: Being Asexual in a Monosexist Society

by Lauren Jankowski

Growing up, I was always different—much quieter than most people my age, more comfortable in books than in social situations, and a perpetual dreamer. While most girls I knew planned their weddings and played house, I reveled in imaginary worlds. While they dreamed of Prince Charming, I dreamed of a rag-tag group of friends who would join me on adventures. Marriage, weddings, children—they just never appealed to me. I found them rather boring.

Most of the adults in my life just shook their heads at me or, on occasion, scolded me for not attempting to fit in. In elementary school I taught myself how to pretend to want what others did, even when I could not be less interested. I had no idea how much this would hurt me later in life—basically locking myself in a closet, which would be my home for years.

By middle school, most of my female peers were busy trying to set one another up with boys. Heteronormativity, the cultural bias that assumes heterosexuality is the only normal, natural expression of sexuality, became more pronounced. As a result, I became increasingly aware that something was different about me.

I began desperately searching for someone, *anyone*, I could relate to. If not in life, surely I would find them in books. I wasn't gay, but I sure as hell wasn't straight. I didn't fit into the bisexual category

either. I felt an enormous amount of love for my friends and most of my family, but I had no interest in romantic relationships or sex. For the first time, the stories I'd loved and cherished failed me. The only characters who were remotely similar to me, disinterested in romance, were the villains. They were also broken, twisted, not right. Was that me? Was *I* broken?

I started to isolate myself, not wanting anyone to discover what I came to see as my shame. Until I could find a term or a cause for this condition, until I could be *fixed*, I wanted to be quarantined. Self-isolation invited merciless bullying and teasing.

High school was probably the worst period of my life. I struggled with body image issues, had almost completely isolated myself and experienced severe panic attacks that struck without warning. Add the typical school stresses to this and you have a volatile cocktail.

I also had to deal with the toxic message from my extended family that I was going to find the right man and settle down eventually, when I least expected it. No one would listen to what *I* wanted or desired. No one even asked.

Then came sex education.

The first day set off the mother of all panic attacks. Its message, "Most of you have already had sex and those who haven't want to do it, so here's how not to die or get pregnant from it," reinforced every single fear I had tried to bury. I didn't want sex, so there had to be something wrong with me. Maybe I was dying. I suddenly couldn't breathe and felt my heart start

hammering in my chest. The walls seemed to close in on me. Through some miracle, I managed to hold it together until the bell rang.

I can't remember exactly when I found the term "asexuality," but I remember how. I had skipped lunch, which I never ate anyway, and wound up in the library—mid-panic attack. A cold sweat had formed on my skin, my legs were shaking and it felt like my heart was about to burst out of my chest. I found the nearest computer, sat down and frantically typed in something like, "causes for lack of sexual desire."

I hid the screen as I waited for the search results. One of the first links that popped up explored asexuality. Curious, I clicked the link. As I read, the tension gradually left my body. My heart rate slowed and I could breathe again. I finally had the term I had been looking for: "aromantic asexual." That's what I was! I wasn't dying, I wasn't broken. There was nothing wrong with me. I was...okay.

Coming Out

I stayed hidden for years more, pretending to experience crushes and attraction, feeling like I could pass for what society deemed "normal." Inside, I was disgusted with myself. On top of that, I was angry and hurt that I could find no asexuals in the fantasy novels I enjoyed reading—with the exception of Artemis, goddess of the hunt.

As I continued through high school, I started to write my own novels—stories rich with diversity and strong asexual characters. I gave up a social life to flesh

out this imaginary world. My dream was to become an author and I was determined to make it a reality.

After graduating and starting college, I decided to try coming out to a few people. I yearned for friends. I have never been good with online interactions and avoided internet message boards. I loved the few people in my life dearly, but I questioned whether I could trust them with my secret. I still struggled to accept asexuality as a valid orientation. I didn't see any examples of it anywhere in reality or in popular culture. If I, an asexual, had trouble accepting my orientation, how would anyone else?

Eventually, I just couldn't keep it a secret anymore. When I started testing the waters, people I loved and trusted started treating me like a broken thing in need of repair. Some members of my extended family and even some friends suggested what amounted to "corrective rape"—a criminal act in which someone is raped in an attempt to change their sexual identity. My immediate family accepted me for who I was and respected asexuality, thankfully, but why couldn't others?

Amid this turmoil, I was working with a writing mentor. He pushed me to become a better writer, instructed me on technique and helped me with query letters. We discussed all kinds of subjects, which provided the intellectual stimulation I craved. He gradually earned my trust and became one of the few people I looked up to. (Trust was not something I gave easily and once you had it, you had my fierce loyalty and respect.) I figured if anyone would accept me for

who I was, it would be him, a person who had always declared himself a feminist.

Instead, he wound up being the one who broke me. There had been warning signs, things my few friends saw that I missed. When I first came out to him, he quoted an obscure writer who said that one could never be a great author without having experienced sex. According to him, the one thing I wanted more than anything, to be an author, was unattainable because of something I had no control over—my asexuality.

The relationship deteriorated rapidly until he declared that I wasn't worth his time and turned me away, but not without some parting shots. Just to make sure any self-esteem I had left was sufficiently extinguished.

Needing to escape proximity to him, I turned to an anthropology professor who had always been kind to me, offering encouragement when I needed it. He was one of a few professors who saw something special in and believed in me, even when I questioned why.

I asked his advice, not mentioning exactly why I needed to get away. He had already told me I had too much potential to remain in that school anyway and recommended Beloit College. It was nearby, close enough that I could return home and see my animals, which had become one of the few lifelines I had left.

I was accepted to Beloit, and spent the entire orientation weekend hiding. People were just too dangerous when they learned of my condition. And they would learn, if I let them in. I still hated being asexual and that I couldn't be normal. Because I was a

masochist—perhaps punishing myself for my condition—I remained in touch with my ex-mentor, letting him continue to tear me apart.

When I had arrived at Beloit, I had not written a word for months. I had given up, because what was the point? I knew I could not make myself want sex, so I figured I was incapable of being a good writer.

Then, something remarkable happened: I chose a class that would end up saving me. On a whim, I signed up for a course on Classical Mythology. It was one of the only subjects that offered comfort, since Artemis was the only non-evil asexual character I had found.

The first day of classes, I went through in a daze until the last one, my classical mythology class. The professor, a younger man with a kind face, entered the classroom. Instead of lecturing us, he started discussion. I'd entered the room having felt exhausted, but as he spoke, I perked up.

As weeks passed, I found Classical Mythology to be welcoming and safe. Worlds that my ex-mentor had ripped away, this professor and class returned. I started asking him questions through email, wanting someone with whom I could talk. Then I began staying after class to talk to him. I expected him to turn me away, but he never did. Nor did he make me feel stupid for asking questions or freakish for my introverted ways.

One day, after a particularly harsh email from the ex-mentor, I went to Classical Mythology and I laid my head on my desk, crestfallen. I expected to be told to straighten up, but I didn't have the energy to care.

Instead, the professor pulled a chair over, sat down and talked to me, answering a question I had emailed to him the previous night. By the time class started, I was able to lift my head up and endure the rest of the day. Gradually, the self-loathing that had overwhelmed me began dissipating, freeing me up creatively. I started polishing the rough drafts of my novels, stunned that I could write again. Meanwhile, I was terrified of what would happen if this professor ever found out I was asexual. I still hated that I was “ace” (slang for asexual), but I was starting to accept it.

My fiery passion started to return as well. I had already declared my major, Women and Gender Studies—embracing the feminism that I had long been proud of. Although I felt I was an outsider in feminism, which never seemed to address the pervasive monosexism within society, I wanted to fight the good fight: *Gender equality, hell yeah!*

As the semester wound down, I learned that my mythology professor was only visiting; he wouldn't return the next semester. What was I going to do? The day of the final, I fought tears.

We took one last walk through campus; I followed him on a cold December night. Even though I trusted him, part of me expected him to turn me away, but he never did. I couldn't watch him drive away and headed towards where my parents were parked and waiting. I silently cried the whole way home.

Around Christmas, my mythology professor responded to an email I had sent and mentioned that Beloit was going to delete the account he had as a

visiting professor but said I could contact him whenever I desired at his personal email (and he certainly hoped there would be more questions). That was probably the only Christmas I ever enjoyed.

Still, there was a gnawing unease in my gut. I knew he would eventually find out about what I was. Friendship with this professor gave me the courage to cut off all contact with my ex-mentor. Ultimately, I told my mythology professor I was asexual and braced for his response. I never had anything to worry about: my mythology professor responded enthusiastically and the revelation changed nothing about our friendship. He even provided a couple examples of asexuality from the classics.

We remain in touch to this day.

Busting Out of the Closet: Becoming a Badass Asexual Feminist Activist

I wound up graduating with honors, and had found allies on campus—friends who loved and accepted me. Once I learned to embrace my asexuality, I broke down the walls I had hidden behind for far too long. I didn't shy away from love and I refused to see the platonic love in my life as being less valuable than the romantic love others experienced. My feminism became intersectional.

When I recommitted to pursuing my dream of being an author, I was instantly met with wave after wave of misogyny and ace-phobia. Literary agents and publishing houses were uninterested in asexuals. There was no room for them in stories, they seemed to

believe; asexual content was too niche and unimportant. My newfound confidence enabled me to say, “Fuck that and fuck you. I’ll publish my books on my own.”

So I did. My novels are filled with the strong women I had searched for yet seldom found in stories, including a badass bookworm aromantic-asexual woman. I’d never shied from my feminism. Now I don’t shy from my asexuality either. I wear it as a badge of honor. Nobody will ever make me feel ashamed of who I am ever again. I am out and proud, both for myself and for aces who can’t be. I fight like hell against society’s hierarchical view of love. Love is love, one kind is not more important than the other. My platonic love is just as fulfilling and valid as romantic and/or sexual love experienced by others.

In 2015 I created Asexual Artists, a blog dedicated to highlighting the contributions of asexual creatives. It is the site that would have been a light for my younger self in her darkest moments, when she felt that the world was against her. It would have brought her comfort when she felt isolated and alone.

The site is thriving and I receive messages every week from aces who thought they were broken freaks of nature. When I attend conventions to sell books, I bring my ace pride flag with me and set it up at the front of my table. I love the woman I have become and I love that I’m asexual. I love that I’m a badass aromantic-asexual feminist and I will continue fighting for asexual representation and gender equality as long as there is breath in my body.

Love is more than sex and romance. Art does not require one to be sexually active any more than it requires one to be a certain race, socioeconomic class or gender. Love is something everyone deserves. I love and am loved. I am not broken. I am not missing out on anything and I'm certainly not alone. My life is more love-filled than ever. I have found more acceptance than I ever dared dream of. People love me for who I am, not who they want me to be and I, in return, love them just as much. Embracing my asexuality didn't condemn me to a lifetime of loneliness. It did the exact opposite.

Lauren Jankowski, an author from Illinois, has been an avid reader and a genre feminist for most of her life. She holds a B.A. in Women and Gender Studies from Beloit College. In 2015, she founded Asexual Artists, a Tumblr and WordPress site dedicated to highlighting the contributions of asexual identifying individuals to the arts. She has been writing fiction since high school, when she noticed a lack of strong women in the popular genre books. She participates in activism for asexual visibility and feminist causes. She is the author of the ongoing series, "The Shape Shifter Chronicles." Learn more at LaurenJankowski.com.



“I was just a normal girl with raging hormones. Being fascinated with sexual pleasure is a part of being human.” – Erica Garza



PORN PROBLEMS AND SHAME

Call me naïve, but I had no idea how much the topic of porn would play into my work as a sex writer and show host. I hadn't used it, after all, nor had any of my serious boyfriends that I knew of; we hadn't felt the need. But there were other reasons I didn't turn to, and secretly shunned, adult film. My long-held body image issues led me to feel I could never measure up physically to the voluptuous women featured in the films. I couldn't stomach the thought of a partner using it for the same reason. I'd also learned that porn was sinful and shame-worthy, and that most women who perform in adult film are forced into it and mistreated. (Even when we think we've moved past sexual shame instilled during our youth, it can linger on deceptively.)

I've since learned that there's a whole lot more to adult entertainment than what meets the mainstream/mass public's eye. Alternate genres are evolving—feminist porn being the one I'm most

cheering (as in yelping excitedly at the top of my lungs) for. I've also met, spoken to and befriended women who perform in adult films, many of whom feel deeply empowered by the work.

And yet, the bulk of mainstream porn continues to be created by and for men—even though a growing number of women are viewing it. A substantial amount of pornography contains violence toward women, which, in my opinion, is inexcusable; teaching viewers to associate abuse (which is far different from BDSM, by the way) with arousal is seriously dangerous. I'm all for free, creative expression of our sexuality, but when even kids learn that male-centric, violent porn is “sexy,” we have a huge problem. I don't see how this type of porn could *not* contribute to rape culture and a broad range of other problems, from troubled relationships to ongoing shame. But that's only part of the problem.

Since the dawn of the internet, porn has become increasingly prevalent and accessible—which wouldn't be such a bad thing if the cultural canvas surrounding it weren't so...befuddling. Thanks to our lack of comprehensive sex education from early childhood on, good old Professor Internet has stepped in as our culture's primary teacher. I've heard from parents of kids as young as eight who've discovered their son or daughter using porn compulsively—which isn't terribly surprising, given how seldom children's sexual curiosities are addressed elsewhere. Porn is the erotic elephant in the room that countless engage in and too few discuss.

Parents don't want to believe their kids see or even have interest in adult film, and very few people explain to kids how porn and real sex vary. Many people now associate self-pleasure and masturbation exclusively with pornography, as though they are inseparable entities, which saddens me. Is there a place for porn? Absolutely. Many people report moderate use without any downsides, saying that it enhances their relationships and sex lives. For those who do experience complications—not only of porn, but cultural and familial issues surrounding it—the damage can run deep.

It took me months of searching to find a woman willing to discuss her own complicated relationship with porn on Girl Boner®. Several who agreed ended up backing out as the interview date grew near. Then I encountered Erica Garza. The accomplished writer told her story in a compelling article for *Salon*, then on my show and now here for you all. You'll want to pull up a chair for this one.

How I Got Hooked On Shame

by Erica Garza

I started masturbating when I was twelve years old with the help of a water faucet. I learned about this technique from Loveline, a radio talk show about sex and love on LA's rock station KROQ. When a caller revealed her fascination with water faucets, I was already hungry for an outlet for all my pent-up sexual frustration. I'd been dealing with horniness since I was much younger, without the knowledge of what I could do, as a child, to make my situation livable. And I hadn't even menstruated yet, so bigger hormonal changes were on their way.

Callers often probed the Loveline hosts, Dr. Drew Pinsky and Adam Carolla, for relationship advice for addiction-related problems. When the caller fascinated with water faucets—a woman—called in, it seemed to me she was only calling in to gloat. (I don't recall her specific question.) She'd discovered this new and gratifying way in which to have mind-blowing orgasms. I had no idea what an orgasm was, but hearing the way she talked about it, I needed to know. She said all she had to do was sit in the bathtub, spread her legs and turn the water faucet on.

I could do that.

I was eight years old the first time I recall being interested in sex. I'd shut myself away in my room and stage explicit scenarios with Ken and my Barbies. If I were to describe the scenes now using the search terms I relied on later when I got addicted to porn,

they would include “reverse gangbang,” “interracial” and “old and young” (because Skipper was involved).

My early diaries were filled with stick figure sex scenes, mainly just body atop body—the same basic stuff I acted out between my Mattel®-made porn stars. I wasn’t sure what a penis looked like, but that didn’t stop me from ogling men’s crotches all the time. Crotches, muscular arms, hairy chests—I was interested in all of it. I stared at women’s breasts and long legs with the same kind of fascination mixed with desperation. I made lists of all the people I wanted to “kiss” when really I meant *seduce*. Though I wasn’t yet sure how sex worked, I knew that the sensations between my legs had everything to do with other human bodies. Sexual impulse doesn’t need to be taught.

Though I’ll admit I was hooked on masturbation as soon as I discovered it, I wasn’t addicted right away. I was just a normal girl with raging hormones. Being fascinated with sexual pleasure is a part of being human.

I wish someone had told me that.

Unfortunately, I didn’t know that what I was feeling (and doing) was normal. My parents were young when they had me and probably figured I’d learn about sex at school or from friends—the way they had learned. They sent me to a Catholic school, where I learned two things early on: sex was something that happened between a man and woman, not a girl and her hand, and masturbation, besides being a sin, was for boys. Girls just weren’t talking about this sort of thing.

I started to think something was wrong with me. That's when shame became tangled up in my pleasure. I should also mention that, at twelve, I was diagnosed with scoliosis and had to wear a bulky back brace, so I became incredibly withdrawn and insecure. I used masturbation, my dark secret, as an escape method.

Soon I was staying up late to watch soft-core porn on Cinemax, low-budget films usually starring Shannon Tweed that managed to be erotic without being entirely sexually explicit. I watched them almost every night. But then I discovered the endless variety of the internet, and there was no turning back. As the internet became more sophisticated, so did my sexual compulsions. Having cybersex turned into downloading pictures (this is in the days of dial-up internet). Then streaming videos became available; new stimuli kept me enthralled all the time.

What had been a normal sexual curiosity was now a deviation. An addiction.

The biggest impact this addiction has had on my life was the constant feeling of disconnection. Pursuit of orgasm took precedence in my life. Non-romantic relationships became rare as I tried to use sex to feel close to others, instead of building friendships or allowing myself to become too emotionally invested.

Though I've gone through promiscuous periods in my life, having unprotected sex with various partners in my twenties, my biggest problem has always been with porn. Fixed on my computer screen, I would completely isolate myself and let hours slip by while I sank deeper into shame and self-hatred. And one of the dangerous things about addiction is that it often

takes more and more intensity to keep its allure. I can't just watch a little porn; I have to watch a *lot* of it. I can't just watch the same kind of porn perpetually; I have to watch progressively harder-core clips to stay engaged.

Because my shame and pleasure were intertwined, I made sure to watch porn that made me feel ashamed, such as videos of women being walked around on leashes or being slapped and ridiculed. The more degradation, the better. I needed to feel that I was some sick and twisted girl, somebody broken, somebody bad, because that's what pleasure had come to represent for me.

About two years ago, I started to get honest about my addiction. On my thirtieth birthday, I took a soul-searching trip across the world to Bali and promised myself to start living my best life. Many people credit Elizabeth Gilbert's book *Eat, Pray, Love* for making Bali a major destination for women on a mission to find "the one," but Bali, especially Ubud where I stayed, has a long history of spiritual awakening. You can see it every day as the women make devotional offers to statues of their deities and the men play *gamelan*, spiritual music played on gongs, meant to bring harmony and protection. In Bali, I leaped into a practice of meditation and yoga and spent much of my time alone to examine what was going on in my life—the good and the bad. I, too, was on a mission to find "the one," but that person wasn't somebody external. That person was me.

Making a trip like this forces a person to become really vulnerable and authentic. Not long after, I

started attending Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, I committed to therapy and I found myself in a strong, loving relationship with an understanding and patient partner.

I began to talk openly about this painful part of my history because I believed it was the only way to make peace with myself and truly connect with another person. And though shame still creeps up on me, as old patterns tend to, awareness and self-love remind me that I am more powerful than my patterns. I am neither my history nor my fear.

Since I've started to share my story, the letters I've received from like-minded people have shown me that I am not, as I'd long believed, alone in this addiction. So many of us, especially women who did not want to be labeled "sluts," have felt isolated and ashamed because of misinformation and silence around sex.

I hope that other women will feel encouraged to speak about their own afflictions as a result of my oath to be honest about what has for too long been a source of shame in my life. There is power in vulnerability. And there is great relief in dismantling an old secret. I want other girls and women going through this sort of thing to know that there's someone out there who's going through it, too. And I'm doing all right.

Erica Garza is a writer from Los Angeles. Her essays have appeared in *Salon*, *Narratively*, *Substance*, *The Manifest Station*, *Bustle* and *Luna Luna*. Read more at www.ericagarza.com.



“My sexual awakening has been equal parts exploring new experiences and healing old traumas. I have reclaimed my body as mine.” – Trish Causey



SEX TOYS AND SELF-STIMULATION

There's a saying often attributed to Mae West: "Good sex is like good bridge. If you don't have a good partner, you better have a good hand." I dig this idea—but it's only partly true. While self-stimulation can be particularly important when you're single, its value goes far beyond that.

Exploring your body and sexuality through masturbation makes way for self-discovery, increased pleasure, minimized stress, better sleep and more benefits—whether you're sexually active with another/others or not. And while it's just as natural for women to engage in solo play like men, they are a lot more likely to feel ashamed of it. Some women, my former self included, shy away from it, deeming it wrong or a waste of time.

But here's the thing: Giving yourself sexual pleasure is a seriously groovy thing, whether you engage every now and then or more frequently. I'm a

big fan of sex toys for enhancing sexual growth, pleasure and intimacy. As you'll learn from Trish Causey's story, however, it's wise to think beyond your vibrator alone. No toy can replace the self-discovery that happens with your own two hands. As Trish illustrates, recognizing, exploring and honoring the heck out of your capacity for pleasure are near superpowers for sexual empowerment.

Made for Sex

by Trish Causey

I was raised Southern and Catholic. Those two factors guaranteed I was doomed to a life of sexual repression. As a Southern girl, I was raised to be a “little lady,” which meant being seen and not heard and only speaking when spoken to. Disagreeing with a man instantly blacklisted a woman as obstinate, opinionated, and troublesome; and asking for something from which only I might benefit was just downright selfish.

I was forced to attend Catholic school and weekend mass. Six days per week I was subjected to hypocritical, sexist dogma delivered with all the verve of Southern tent-revival zeal. Fire and brimstone were dished out in equal doses with church teachings on the “evils” of premarital sex, extra-marital sex and homosexual sex. A French kiss was considered as sinful as murder. This confused me since a female neighbor started molesting me around the same time. I thought I was a “child lesbian” and going to Hell even though I was a straight-A student and Girl Scout.

Around age ten, I hit puberty. Or more correctly, puberty hit me—and how! Seemingly overnight, I had C-cup breasts. By age eleven, I was a D-cup. The boys at school ridiculed me, shaming my body because they did not understand what was happening. To them, I was just “fat.” Grown men looked at me differently, though I did not understand why. I didn't ask; I was there to be seen, I had learned, not heard.

Somewhere between the ages thirteen and sixteen, a man told me I had a body made for sex. Well, duh. I was already going to Hell because of my body and being a “child lesbian.” Honestly, I had no idea what he meant. I just did the polite, Southern “little lady” thing and smiled, gave a quaint laugh and changed the subject.

Some of the fathers of my classmates and some of the straight men in the periphery of my theater and ballet worlds were pervy toward me. My instincts stayed on full alert, so I used my Southern charm to push the creeps away. It didn't always work. Being busty was bad enough; add in the stereotypes about redheads, and men never looked at me as if I were a human being, just something to be fucked for their pleasure. After all, my body was made for sex. Interesting, since I was still a virgin at the time.

For some reason, virginity is still a prized commodity—unless you're twenty-one and a virgin. Then it's as though your unused vagina becomes an albatross around your neck, an embarrassing billboard of how uncool and unwanted you must be.

Living on my own in my own apartment, I didn't date. I had artsy friends, but I wasn't ready to have sex because I was still dealing emotionally with the truth of being molested those three years as a kid. And frankly, I was embarrassed about having to tell a guy about my virginity. I didn't have to wait long because I was date-raped in my apartment one night. I didn't go to the police because I didn't want them to laugh at me. Who would believe a busty redhead was still a virgin at twenty-one?

Life went on. I had partners and attended theater orgies. At twenty-five, I was engaged but preparing to leave my fiancée when I found out I was pregnant with my daughter. I stayed because I wanted her to have a secure life, even though the marriage was miserable for me. My existence became a humdrum monotony of chores, laundry, teaching voice lessons on the side for extra money and giving my then-husband a blow-job once per week so he didn't complain about bills.

Eventually, I decided to work for myself full-time, pursuing writing and music. I signed up for a workshop in Houston, which meant flying and being away from home for a few days. As I packed my bag, I looked longingly toward my vibrator. I really wanted to bring him because I would have time to enjoy some orgasms in the hotel room since I was on a mini-vacation from “mom responsibilities.”

I reached for him, then a vision flashed before my eyes—me being chosen for a random search by airport security. I saw my belongings rifled through and my vibrator ogled by complete strangers in line to board the plane. In my mind's eye, I watched in horror as a TSA agent brandished my vibrator above his head for all to see like a jungle chimp showing off a prized banana. Needless to say, I left the vibrator at home. What would a few days without it matter anyway? I could just have orgasms the old-fashioned way—with my hands. Except, I couldn't. Those three days away from my vibrator were just a glimpse into how removed from my body I was. Once home, I was back on the vibrator.

Over the next few years, that vibrator was

replaced by a stronger vibe, then a rabbit-type dual-vibe, then a Hitachi wand, then a high-powered back-massager. The more I used a vibrator, the more I needed a vibrator. Finally, my miserable marriage reached the point that I was now sleeping on the couch so as not to sleep next to the guy I so desperately wanted to divorce and kick out of my life. Without privacy, there were no orgasms for me. On the odd night that I got to sleep in my own bed while my then-husband was working a night shift, I resorted to the back massager or the Hitachi Wand for a quickie climax just to feel human again.

I did not realize what I was doing to my body and my orgasms until another trip, when I was gone for nearly four weeks. Again, I chose not to bring a vibrator. I had been sleeping on the couch for nearly a year at this point. The first time I went to touch myself while lying in my deluxe bed in the hotel room, I could not feel anything. My fingertips felt my clit, but my clit did not reciprocate. My fingers could feel my labia, but my labia could not feel my fingertips. With the fingers of one hand on my clit and the fingers of my other hand inside, reaching for my G-Spot that was in there somewhere, I rubbed and rubbed and rubbed, but nothing. I was sweating and panting from exertion, not pleasure. There may have been a minuscule release but nothing I would call an orgasm.

The next night, I repeated this with the same lackluster results. Over the course of two weeks, I tried and tried again, until finally, I achieved an orgasm. Not like the ones to which I was accustomed with the high-powered vibes, but it was reminiscent of the

orgasms I used to have. For the next two weeks, I kept this up: hands on and hands in, and the orgasms became more pronounced and happened sooner with less effort.

Not long after I returned from this trip, I moved out of my marriage and started life as a single mom. I left the back-massager but took my Hitachi Wand. My first night in my new apartment I used the Hitachi Wand, and that first orgasm was absolutely amazing. A few more times with the Hitachi vibrator over the next month, however, and I was back to where I was, needing higher speeds for a longer time to achieve a basic orgasm. It finally occurred to me that it was not the massager that had caused that great orgasm when I returned home; rather, my body was the cause of this newly found pleasure.

I told myself I wouldn't use the vibe anymore. I lied. Going back to hands-on/hands-in was more difficult than I had thought it would be. I got frustrated after ten or fifteen minutes and inevitably reached for the Wand—the ridiculously loud, chainsaw-buzzing vibrator—that I could only use at three a.m. under four blankets to avoid waking the neighbors, and that I was now dependent upon to have any pleasure. The last straw was one of these three a.m. sessions and the lackluster climax that ensued.

My body had learned to have orgasms again with just my hands when I was on that trip. It took time, but it happened. The only way *not* to revert back to the convenience of the vibrator was to get rid of it. So at five a.m., I got up before anyone could see me and wrapped it in a brown paper bag then two plastic

grocery bags and tied them off tightly. I threw my Hitachi Wand in the dumpster. I vowed never to use a vibrator ever again, and I haven't.

The next six months were as frustrating as they were crucial in my attempt to reclaim my body and my orgasms. My clit could not feel me. She was dead, damaged from the high-powered machinery I had subjected her to for years. I was devastated. I thought how stupid I was to have thrown out a perfectly good vibrator—but what else was I going to do? Donate it to Goodwill?

My clit and labia started to show signs of sensation, and I was having okay full-body orgasms from stimulating my clit externally and my G-spot internally. Yet, I sensed there was more, and I wanted to find it. I wanted to reclaim my body from my dehumanizing attackers and my pathetic, orgasm-less marriage. If I really had a body made for sex, then dammit, I was ready to let my body have as much pleasure as she wanted.

I started studying women's sexual anatomy. Information on women's sexual function, I found, was not nearly as readily available or comprehensive as that for men's sexual function. The almighty penis was certainly well documented, but the clitoris was still an enigma, apparently; and the so-called G-spot was still relegated to the land of myth by many male researchers—as if their opinion outranked my very obvious G-spot orgasms.

Not only was my clit *not* dead, but the pleasure she was capable of was indescribable. This pleasure

was heightened tenfold because I was purposely stimulating my prostate as well. I had read everything I could on the Gräfenberg-spot, a.k.a. the G-spot, which I renamed my She-Spot because I did not want that very sacred part of my body named after a man. Because I was using my hands during arousal and focused much of the stimulation on my entire prostate, I was able to feel how she responded to different touch: the changes to her texture, how her tendrils emerged through my vaginal wall, all that happened in the different parts of my prostate and the rest of my vagina. I was able to tell by the specific reactions of my prostate exactly where I was in my arousal. Adding the external clit to the mix sent me off into realms heretofore unknown.

Genital-focused orgasms were great, but they made me feel as if that were all my body—and therefore, *I*—was good for. I wanted to reclaim my sense of self, my spirit. I wanted to feel whole.

I revisited a few different sexual awakening methods I had read about but never really tried. One in particular stood out because of its seemingly Tantrik basis. A couple of months on this path, and I experienced the orgasm that changed my life. This climax was so profound that, to this day, I am breathless thinking about it. My entire being exploded; in fact, I feared the explosion of climax because I could feel it would be massive. Somehow, I knew this would be the zero-point field of climax orgasms for me. When I finally breathed and allowed it to happen, it was scary and then glorious and then truly unbelievable. In that moment that seemed to last

forever, I was not just part of the Universe, I *was* the Universe. My physical hands were still touching my body, but I felt as if I had spirit hands reaching out in all directions of infinity. I could feel eternity. I was the All.

Now that I knew my anatomy inside and out, I investigated Tantra more deeply and found my true path. The Tantrik principles of allowing and non-judgment were integral to my sexual awakening. All my life, I had been judged. Feeling worthy was new for me. I was experiencing so much that I started to blog about it on ArousedWomanBlog.com, just to document my journey. What I never expected was to come face-to-face with old demons along the way. Being sexually abused and body-shamed and enduring a passionless, loveless marriage were just some of the issues I had to confront in order to awaken and grow. You see, vibrators only affect the physical body, and for me, vibrators eventually ruined my sexual function.

The techniques within Tantra awaken the subtle body as well as the physical body. Tantrik principles awaken the mind, the heart, and the spirit. I experienced heightened pleasure and true bliss that I had only ever imagined, and yet the reality of these new levels of orgasms was so much more incredible. I started to love the journey to climax; arousal was no longer a necessary annoyance in order to have an orgasm. Arousal felt so deep, and full, and luxurious, I would hold off the earth-shattering climax for as long as possible, until my body simply *had* to climax. I learned to listen to the wisdom of my body, wisdom

that had been silenced by machinery. I had orgasms on the way to climax orgasm. Yes, there *are* different types of orgasms! Especially when the subtle body is involved. In fact, there is no limit to the kinds of orgasms or the number of orgasms that are possible for women...or men.

I would spend hours just having nipple orgasms. I had spontaneous orgasms. I was waking up in the middle of the night in back-arching climax orgasms. Suddenly, I was a non-stop, heightened energy-field of orgasm. It was like walking along and suddenly deciding I wanted an orgasm, so I stood on my tip-toes, and—*boom!*—it was there. Orgasms. Climaxes. Spontaneous. Aroused. Any time. All the time.

That jerk from years ago was, in fact, correct. My body was made for sex. But not for him. My body is amazing. She has untold realms to go farther. I can feel it, and Tantra is my guide. My sexual awakening has been equal parts exploring new experiences and healing old traumas. I have reclaimed my body as mine. Her pleasures and secrets are for me to share with whomever I deem worthy to know how amazing I am or for me to revel in all by myself. Yes. I said it. I am amazing. I know it isn't ladylike to be so boastful, but after all the years of trauma and shaming, I have earned my right to be proud of my body and my orgasmic abilities.

My body is made for sexual pleasure. For me.

Trish Causey is an Artist/Activist who has spent most her life dividing her energy between the performing arts and human rights. A freelance writer and radio host, Causey is the creator of ArousedWoman(TM), which focuses on Arts, Activism, and Awakening. Her popular blog, the Aroused Woman Blog, frequently causes palpitations amongst readers on the topics of sex, anatomy, health, relationships, and rabid feminism. *ArousedWoman magazine* examines these topics even further. Causey has won fellowship grants for her original music compositions for stage and voice; and in 2014, Causey ran for Congress as a progressive liberal in the very Red State of Mississippi.
www.TrishCausey.com



“I continue to be curious about sex and enjoy learning about myself through the lens of sexual experience. For me, there’s a lot of richness and value in following my curiosity.” — Jean Franzblau



KINK AND BDSM

Why is it that “kink” and “BDSM” automatically summon up negative terms about sexuality? “Naughty.” “Bad girl.” “Promiscuous.” I’ll tell you my theory. The more taboo and outside of the “norm” one’s sexual desires and behaviors are, the more shame and shunning they attract. People fear *difference* and anything that challenges what feels (here’s that word again) “normal” to them.

But enough with the bunny ears.

Kinky is a broad term that means *involving or given to unusual sexual behavior*. (Thank you, Webster!) In the context of your own life, that could take a broad range of forms. Think about it. If you’ve never had sex, sex of any kind will probably seem kinky. If you’ve never tried oral, sixty-nine or anal sex, these could seem titillatingly risqué and exotic. The more we explore new terrain, literally or figuratively in the bedroom, the more our definition of *kinky* shifts.

Hopefully all of us who desire sex embrace a bit of kinkiness, whatever that means to us, throughout our

sexual journeys. Will it involve whips, chains and handcuffs? Maybe, maybe not. As my friend and sex educator Jean Franzblau teaches, there's much more to kink and BDSM than stereotypes suggest—and when you have a penchant for all-things-kinky and engage safely, the rewards can be immense.

A Suburban Girl Becomes a Sexually Free Woman

by Jean Franzblau

On Thursday night I drive with two friends, Adrienne and Heather, toward our evening event, a show called Bawdy Storytelling. Every story told will be a true tale about sexuality. Adrienne is a sultry, freckle-faced redhead; a late bloomer coming into her own. Heather is a tantra teacher with an explosion of curly blonde hair that cascades over her bare shoulders. She's sporting a sleek red jumpsuit she's made herself. We are one-upping each other about our recent sexual adventures. One woman boasts how sometimes she takes a bath, lights candles and makes love to herself in front of her mirror. Another says she has discovered a toy that stimulates her G-spot perfectly and swears by it. There is much laughter. We've parked and are walking toward the venue. We are loud and happy and sexy.

On Tuesday morning my lover, Brett, and I are practicing Orgasmic Meditation. I'm on my back, nestled among a pile of pillows. Brett is seated on my right; one of his hands is under my bottom. With the heel of the palm of his other hand he gently presses the skin of my pubic mound back to lift my clitoral hood. He's expertly stroking the head of my clitoris with lubricant and has been doing so quietly for many minutes. I can feel the tension of a monster orgasm gathering like a storm in my belly. And then, *wham*. The energy shoots out of me in a shower of vaginal

spasms and throaty shouts that goes on and on. Brett has a timer nearby, as dictated by the practice. He can tell me for certain that my climax was forty-five seconds long. I feel accomplished. I know women can have even longer orgasms than that. One day, I hope to reach sixty seconds or more.

These are just two scenarios from my life right now, a Shangri-La of sexual expression where there is so much to enjoy and so much more to explore. This, to me, is a taste of what it's like to be sexually free. What I'm experiencing feels precious and rare to me. It didn't come easily.

A Hostile Sexual Culture

I grew up a lucky child in a suburb of South Florida. I watched a ton of network television after school. I saw blockbuster movies at the local movie theater on the weekends, and during the summers I flipped through *Seventeen* magazines at the beach. Passively inundated with images and advertisements, I learned indirect lessons about what it meant to be a woman. "Be perfect, be skinny, be sexy," they seemed to say at once.

I remember coming home from summer camp between seventh and eighth grade. I had sores on my legs from a rash. Less concerned about my health or discomfort, I was in tears about the fact that my legs were no longer pretty. My mother couldn't make sense of my vanity. At thirteen years old, I felt I was "damaged goods." I thought my value could only be as high as the smoothness of the skin on my shins. This

was how my daily dose of billboards and TV commercials for cosmetics, perfume, shampoo and depilatory products had twisted my brain.

“She’s such a prude,” I overheard the most popular boy, Colin Buchner, say to his comical friend, Steve Mitchell. I knew I didn’t want to be a prude like whomever they were talking about. I wanted them to like me.

“She’s such a slut,” said Wendy Kane, a girl I looked up to, about Laci Cooper, a fellow student in Algebra class. I had no idea why Wendy said that, or even what “slut” meant. It must have been very bad. From how Wendy said it, sluts were disgusting.

“Slut” and “prude” were insults that left no room for error. Wanting sex too much or too little were both offenses. American female adolescence is a sexual trip wire. My friend Eva didn’t pass easily. After being raped in high school, she was labeled a “slut” by her classmates. She felt such shame, humiliation and anger that she ran away from home. Eva, myself and so many teenagers like us were caught in an impossible bind. We were sexual beings who weren’t allowed to be sexual.

Even though I was immersed in these confusing and negative messages about sex, I remained extremely curious. I found a book called *How to Make Love to a Man*, which became my private bible. I wanted to become an expert at this secret art. But there were no mentors, pathways or celebrations of a young woman’s developing sexuality.

I had an older sister and mother, but we didn't have the cultural permission to talk openly. Married in her early twenties, my mother's experience was limited. My sister muddled through her own journey. All women, yet we couldn't support one another around this very important subject.

As I grew into a young adult, this turned into a real problem. I remember telling my sister, "I feel like an accident waiting to happen." I meant that I intuitively knew I didn't have what I needed to navigate sexuality safely. She didn't know what to tell me.

In college, I attended alcohol-drenched sorority parties to have a chance to express my sexuality. Following in the footsteps of my peers, I figured that under the hazy veil of drink, all things were temporarily okay.

The summer of my junior year, I felt so guilty one morning after allowing myself to be sexual that I woke up early, showered and flossed my teeth a little too well. I tried to clean every inch of me so I could feel new again on the inside. Though I wasn't religious, the concept of sex being dirty found its way into my psyche anyway.

Adulthood Without Sexual Wisdom

My college years and twenties felt like a binge-and-purge nauseous ride. I would starve myself sexually, sometimes for years. And when I came upon the rare chance to be sexual, I kept escalating the

situation beyond what I could handle emotionally. I left many of these experiences feeling shipwrecked.

After college, I was deeply attracted to a friend and neighbor but didn't have the words to tell him. When the relationship finally had a sexual moment, I was overjoyed. Later, he felt it had been a mistake. I couldn't tolerate halting the intimacy and sex once that door had been opened. The friendship blew apart.

I was depressed. I needed help and found a recovery program for people with sex and relationship issues. Thus began a process of personal growth that continued for six years. Gradually, I learned to cultivate deeper friendships and at last was able to have a long-term relationship.

I met my boyfriend, Tony, at a Valentine's Day pajama party. He had a corny sense of humor, and we both loved to hike. Though he was thirteen years older than I, it didn't seem to matter. I adored him. But over the months and then years, I noticed something troubling. Tony's family had been ravaged by alcoholism. And when Tony had a few drinks, the shift in his personality scared me.

One night at a friend's birthday party at a Mexican restaurant, he reached under the tablecloth, under my skirt and between my legs. The margaritas were flowing and lots of conversations were going on at the same time. I whispered to him to stop playing around; I didn't like what was happening. Ultimately, he put his finger in my vagina against my will. Only years later did I realize that this is called date rape.

Shortly after, I saw a gynecologist to find out what was wrong with me. I had developed a painful burning

sensation during intercourse with Tony. It took the doctor a long time to figure out that I had a condition called vaginismus. This is the involuntary tightening of the pelvic floor muscles, which makes intercourse uncomfortable or impossible.

I purchased a kit from Vaginismus.com and went through a series of exercises, affirmations, breathing techniques and inventories to resolve the problem. I finally figured it out. That night at the Mexican restaurant was a deal breaker for me and for my body. My relationship with Tony needed to end.

The break-up was excruciating. I felt like I had committed a murder. I was so deeply codependent with Tony that when I left a message for my therapist desperate for help, I said, “*We’re* in a lot of pain.” Even broken up, I was enmeshed with him.

Permission to Start Over, Learn and Grow

As the grief from my break-up with Tony quieted, I was left with four truths:

My body mattered.

My sexuality counted.

Breaking up with Tony was one of the most important, strong actions I’d ever taken for myself.

I’d never put my sexuality aside again.

The experience launched me on a journey of personal and sexual exploration that changed my life. I revised a list I’d been keeping in my mind, my sexual

bucket list. I was dedicated to trying new things, even if they were unusual—as long as they didn't hurt me or anyone else.

Around this time my friend, Lori, told me about a book that changed my life: *The Ethical Slut*. The title itself gave me permission to explore. I loved the concept that I could be a person of integrity while expanding this part of my life.

I went online to find people who, like me, wanted to be more sexually open-minded. A new friend, Sean, became my lover. Together we met another couple to experiment with swinging. The best part of that experience was the anticipation and giggles we shared at the naughtiness of it all. In practice, it was too much sex and too soon. We used alcohol—just as in the old days in college—to lower our inhibitions. I left the experience feeling overwhelmed.

Rather than shame myself, I considered it a learning experience. (Note to self: no mind-altering substances when making important choices about sex.) I cheered myself on: “Good for me for experiencing something new! What else do I want to try?”

Sean told me about an S&M (sadism and masochism) dungeon in Los Angeles called The Sanctuary. I pestered him to take me. He explained that there was a whole underground S&M subculture. And far from being scary or dangerous, he said it was unexpectedly comfortable, natural, unpretentious and unashamed. I had no idea at the time that this curious exploration would turn into a deep dive into uncharted parts of my sexuality.

We arrived at the club on a Saturday night and were asked to sign a waiver and pay ten dollars. Then we stepped into a whole new world. Connected to the main room of the club were a series of smaller rooms, each decorated to inspire dark fantasies. In a cozy room decorated with red couches stood a man with kind eyes, spanking a lovely young woman. Fascinated, I later asked him questions like a reporter: “What’s enjoyable for each of you with what you’re doing?”

The S&M culture is a learning culture. He gave me a study list including the book *SM101*. Vincent even tied my hands above my head so I could experience what that was like. (It was titillating and sort of boring, too.) It was all very respectful and friendly.

After that night at The Sanctuary, I began feeling a nagging need for something more. With Sean’s encouragement, I posted an ad on a website called Bondage.com. Within a week, I received a long and thoughtful note from a man named Zack. I liked him right away.

We met at the Good Luck Bar in Silverlake. His hearty laugh struck me—It was warm and deep. Zack had a career in the arts, a family who loved him, friends to hang out with and a kinky streak a mile long. As a newbie, I was interested in surrender and being submissive. Zack had twenty years of experience as a dominant. As a rookie, I couldn’t appreciate how lucky I was.

Zack nurtured, mentored and dominated me. We used safe words to assure my physical and mental well-being. We had a contract, just like in *Fifty Shades*

of Grey! He introduced me to a dizzying kaleidoscope of sexy toys, scenarios and skills. Zack loved exposing newcomers to their own kinky desires. I was shocked at how deep, how arousing and how emotional this world called BDSM was for me. We stayed together for two passionate years.

The break-up with Zack was difficult, yet I learned something important. I no longer judge my relationships by how long they last. Instead I'm grateful for the memories shared, the quality of time spent together and the way that we helped each other learn and grow.

Ongoing Research, Adventure and Activism

My life and sexual expression continue to evolve. I've written a play about erotic curiosity that I perform across the country. I give classes on sexuality and human touch and work with clients as a coach. I'm a member of an amazing, open-minded community called Sex-Positive Los Angeles.

I continue to be curious about sex and enjoy learning about myself through the lens of sexual experience. For me, there's a lot of richness and value in following my curiosity. It goes way beyond a search for pleasure. For me, it's nothing less than reclaiming my authentic self and bringing my best to the world.

After years of tolerating a lackluster sex life, **Jean Franzblau** shook off her cultural baggage and gave herself permission to follow a path of sexual curiosity and adventure. With her background as a writer and performing artist, Jean created the solo show “Coming Out Kinky—A Grown Up Comedy,” which she performs in cities across the country to ignite authentic conversations about sexuality. Jean has worked internationally with companies as a seminar leader and with corporate executives, inspiring people to reach their highest potential. She provides workshops and coaching on sexual esteem, women’s empowerment and a beginner’s introduction to S&M. Jean graduated cum laude with a BA in communications from UCLA and has eighteen years’ experience with the 12-step model of recovery. SexualEsteemWithJean.com



“Being open about issues like sexuality shines light into the darkness, giving us the freedom from sin that we so desperately need... God made sex, and it is good.” — Kelly Wilson



SEX AND RELIGION

I've asked hundreds of women what they learned about sex growing up. The most common responses by far have been some rendition of "it's a Hell-worthy sin" for women—unless the only purpose is procreation within marriage. While there are exceptions, religious denominations that see sex and intimacy as the ultimate expression of divinity, too many girls and women are taught that sex and spirituality are somehow contradictory, as though you can't embrace one and the other. Here's the thing: **THEY AREN'T**. At least, they shouldn't be.

Whether you consider yourself Christian, Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, agnostic or atheist, and regardless of your sexual preferences and orientation, *your sexuality is embraceable*. If a particular institution suggests otherwise, I hope you'll begin to see that it's their rules and regulations that are flawed; not you.

Sex and the Sanctuary

by Kelly Wilson

The closest that I came to having sex at church was in the parking lot. We had dropped our two boys off for the midweek activities provided by our church for the kids in the congregation. I think the leadership expected us to (or at the very least hoped we would) attend one of the small groups or bible studies that they offered the adults during these Wednesday evening hours.

Clearly, we had more important activities to attend to, such as going grocery shopping and having an uninterrupted conversation while the kids were in church. Finishing our shopping earlier than anticipated one Wednesday evening, we found ourselves with a rare private moment in the church parking lot before our kids were dismissed.

The windows of our minivan were darkly tinted and we parked in a far corner of the lot to ensure a measure of privacy. Giggling, we crammed ourselves into the very back seat of the van and I proceeded to ride the sausage pony to great satisfaction. My only real concern was the amount of dog hair on our clothes, as the van is cleaned only about once every ten years.

For a few hours afterward, I wondered if I should feel guilty for not feeling guilty about having had sex with my husband in the church parking lot. It felt a bit wrong but exciting, like drinking real wine for communion or playing Texas Hold 'Em on a Saturday

night before attending Sunday church services. I wondered what my fellow churchgoers might say if I announced during the next women's bible study that my husband and I had done the nasty right across the parking lot. I imagined them spitting out their coffee and gasping, hands to their throats in shock.

The thought of making that announcement was quite entertaining, and promptly filed under the "If my life were a movie, then I would do it" part of my brain. Instead, I knew that I was too afraid to ever bring it up, along with any questions or issues regarding my sexual nature.

Because we don't talk about sex in church.

There should be sex in the sanctuary. Not the physical act, necessarily, but a frank understanding and acceptance of what God has so clearly defined as good and right.

From my first day attending church at fifteen years of age, I understood that sex was something to be avoided. I don't think this is a bad thing. As a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, I was just starting to explore the idea of having sex, not because of hormones or true love, but because that's what I thought I was supposed to do. Being victimized at a young age by my father, I believed that sex was the only thing I had to offer, that I wasn't lovable and had to give myself sexually in order to be valuable to another person.

I had already entered into a sexual relationship by the time I attended church with my boyfriend, who is, coincidentally, the man I would end up marrying and having sex with in the church parking lot several years

later. After we had attended church together for a while, I told him that I no longer wanted to have sex. I had “accepted Jesus into my heart,” and wanted to change the way I was living my life. A pregnancy scare also helped dampen my appetite for sexual behavior.

Accepting Christianity—and the sexual rules that came along with it—saved my life. Learning these rules allowed me to see that there was another way besides what I had been taught, planting the seed of belief that maybe I was lovable and worthy of self-respect. I began to believe that maybe I didn’t *have* to have sex.

Looked at from both a spiritual and practical view, many of the Christian sexual rules actually make a lot of sense. Scripturally, sex is meant to be enjoyed in the context of a relationship, fostering depth and intimacy. In the Bible, two people become one flesh. And while not a sex manual, scripture does make reference to sex as being pleasurable when shared in this context. (Try to read Song of Solomon without working up a sweat.)

The scriptural sexual rules have provided my husband and me with a foundation of trust and security, partly because my acceptance of these guidelines coincided with my teenage years. I’ve been sexually involved with only one person (my husband). I’ve only had the one pregnancy scare, right before we stopped having sex when I was fifteen years old. I have never had a sexually transmitted disease. We assume our sex life is pretty good because we’re having a ton of fun with it and we don’t have other sexual partners or experiences with which to compare it.

While abstaining from sex makes a lot of sense to me, it is incredibly difficult to remain celibate in our culture. Especially if, like me, you have a roaring sex drive and are willing to have a poke in the church parking lot in the back of your minivan. Our two boys are now thirteen and ten years of age. If you had asked me a decade ago regarding what I would tell them about sex, I would have known exactly what to say: “Don’t have sex until you’re married.”

After all, this is one of the Christian sexual rules. But what am I supposed to teach them now that I have developed a sex drive so strong that I’m not entirely sure that I would avoid having sex should I—God forbid—be somehow separated from my husband. The simple “Don’t do it” message doesn’t seem at all deep or significant enough to preach. Even the phrase I have taught my older nephews, “The herp and kids are forever,” simply means that they should wear condoms.

I was twenty when my husband and I got married. He was twenty-two. A good friend of mine at the time asked me if we had gotten married so young so that we could have sex.

The honest-to-God truth? Absolutely.

My husband and I have been married for over twenty years now. It is nothing short of a miracle born of hard work, laughter, tears and sheer determination. I would never advocate for my own children to be married before their brains are fully developed, which doesn’t happen until the age of twenty-five. Getting a divorce is really easy; believe me, I checked it out once or twice over the course of the last twenty years. But

then I ask myself, is getting a divorce down the road somehow better than having pre-marital sex now? This isn't a message I want to pass on to my children.

Once young Christians get married, the message of "*Don't Do It, Don't Do It, Don't Do It!*" gets flipped faster than a light switch after I've stepped on a Lego in the middle of the night. Intentional or not, the overwhelming message from the church to adolescents is, "Sex is bad, bad, bad." Then suddenly, once the vows have been said: "Sex is good! Surprise!"

While avoiding the actual act of sex until marriage helped me personally, the taboo on discussing sex at all—beyond the simple "Don't Do It" message—is ultimately harmful. I would have liked to know that sex was a pleasurable and fun advantage to being married instead of living under a cloud of false guilt and confusion. During our first ten years of marriage, questions crowded my brain: *Am I supposed to be enjoying this?* I thought sex was bad. I didn't think I was supposed to do it at all, but now I was supposed to enter freely into these experiences without feeling completely weirded out?

After we had been married for ten years and I turned thirty, my sex drive was off the charts. Part of this process was due to all of the recovery work I had been doing regarding my past abuse, and part of it was simply hormonal raging. I found myself curious and full of questions with nowhere to go for answers except the internet.

A dicey proposition, to be sure, especially for a Christian woman who enjoys sex and wants to find out more about it without scarring her brain with images

one can't, but wishes to, un-see. I had a ton of questions about masturbating, sex toys, positions and simple logistics; for example, I didn't know that semen comes back out of the vagina once intercourse is done. (Thanks, gravity!) But this would have been good to know once we stopped using condoms as a form of birth control, that we would need an "after-sex towel" in order to save time and money washing sheets all the time.

This attitude of fear and willful ignorance that Christians often employ regarding sex pushes us unwittingly into deeper and darker places of sin. Ironically, this is why Christians don't talk about sex in the first place. We are deeply afraid that even acknowledging this essential aspect of our lives will lead to some wild bacchanalia and we will lose all control or God won't love us or something.

Fear helps to hide sin, allowing it to grow and become destructive. In the darkness, we think that we can hide our innermost thoughts and secrets, and we imagine that shame has trapped us. We get farther and farther mired in these thoughts, feeling false guilt and becoming robbed of the sexual freedom within boundaries that we have been provided.

As long as we in the church do not talk about issues of sexuality, sin is allowed to grow. Being open about issues like sexuality shines light into the darkness, giving us the freedom from sin that we so desperately need.

God made sex, and it is good.

It's time to bring sex out of the church parking lot and into the sanctuary.

Kelly Wilson is an author and comedian who entertains and inspires with stories of humor, healing, and hope. She is the author of *Live Cheap & Free*, *Don't Punch People in the Junk*, and *Caskets From Costco*, along with numerous articles and short stories for children and adults. Kelly Wilson currently writes for a living and lives with her Magically Delicious husband, junk-punching children, dog, cat, and stereotypical minivan in Portland, Oregon. Read more about her at www.wilsonwrites.com.



“This journey of exploring all that I am as a sexual and feminine being is as beautiful now as it previously was painful.” — Kendra Tanner



The Early Years

by Kendra Tanner

When I was six, the *cute boy* in my first grade class asked me to be his “Queen of the School Yard.” I look back on that day and at that little girl who felt good about herself because a boy *liked* her, and wish I could tell her to hold on to her innocence, relish and celebrate in the moment and most importantly, to like herself first.

Some of the other six-year-old girls seemed able to do that. They’d run home and tell their mom, “Johnny likes me!,” or claim they had a boyfriend and delight in their glorious selves. That wasn’t me. I innately knew that liking a boy or being liked wouldn’t be “approved” of. So instead of celebrating, I never talked about the event. If anything, I was fearful and ashamed that such things meant something to me in the first place.

My hunch that boys were not up for discussion at home was affirmed in junior high, when I was pulled out of sex ed class. At the time my mom, along with other Christian moms, was advocating against sexual education being allowed in the public school system.

The message I internalized was that publicly talking about sex is bad, as is being attracted to guys and being *attractive* to guys. I thought I was somehow supposed to rise above the societal norm of sex and attraction to boys being topics to embrace.

This left me, at an early age, developing the pattern of rejecting, denying and avoiding the

curiosity and attraction I felt towards boys, and wondering if I was doing something wrong by acknowledging this part of me. This was just one of many areas of my life where I was not able to express my true feelings.

When I was twelve, my hormones kicked in. Like pretty much everything else in my life, this was another way I thought I was *different*, and not in a good way. My mom did her best to welcome my period in a celebratory way—but the fact that it was referred to as a “menstrual cycle” (which of course it is) while all the girls at school were referring to *periods*, *Aunt Flo* and other cooler names left me feeling isolated.

Another dynamic at this point in life involved the church we attended. I grew up in a church environment where sex and the Devil were synonymous. The story of the pastor’s son and his bride kissing for the very first time at the altar was considered something honorable to aspire to. They were über-protective of the sanctity of marriage, and so at age fifteen or sixteen my dad and I attended a no-sex-before-marriage seminar, where I was asked to sign a covenant with God that I wouldn’t have sex until I was married.

Of course, I signed. By that time, my lack of self-expression had turned me into the dutiful, obedient, get-it-perfect daughter. Plus my dad was sitting right there. Do you really think I was going to start having a *sex talk* with my dad, at church of all places, so that I could actually understand my own hormones, desires, body, and sexuality (all of which I believe are God-given, by the way) before signing away my sex life?

My sixteen-year-old self was not ready for this, so I did what I was supposed to do: sign the paper, walk to the front of the room to hand it in as a public display of my commitment, accepting that if I screwed up, God would break his covenant with me.

Inevitably, I screwed up. Don't we all?

It's especially easy to get it wrong when you sign your sex life away without an alternative for dealing with the reality of teenage life. The solution I was given? Get married. For me, I thought, the sooner the better.

When I was twelve, I remember praying that I would get married at twenty, solely so that I could have sex. I gave myself eight years to hold out, but even at twelve I knew I couldn't wait forever. I held out until I was nineteen—pleasuring myself in the meantime and praying to God that my sins would not be found out.

In hindsight, I'm not really sure what my sins *were*. I was never blatantly told that masturbation was bad or would condemn me to Hell. But I'd concluded from the absence of conversation about it that all things sexual were reserved for marriage. Since I wasn't married, I saw the acknowledgement of my sexual desires as some sort of sin, and started to carry shame that I had these desires.

As a result, I went through adolescence in the crosshairs between trying to avoid the topics of sex, dating and my budding sexuality, while simultaneously trying to resolve, release and accept what was going on with my body and desires. I muddled through dating in my teens, terrified of going anywhere below the belt and practicing saying *no*—to

the extent that I'd meet a guy, and the conversation would go something like this:

Him: Hi, Nice to meet you. Do you want to chat?

Me: Sure, but just so you know we're never ever having sex.

Because that's a normal conversation to have right off the bat...

I lived under the assumption that all men I came across wanted to have sex with me. And it was my job to deny them, in order to protect myself and stay right in God's eyes.

I was fearful of being attractive to men because I didn't want to, or really know how, to have *the sex talk*. I didn't know what I believed or what I wanted to happen. Aside from the unloving and distrusting verbal castration, I only befriended guys who I thought were safe; who I'd never have to say *no* to. I'd get into long-term relationships that weren't a "Hell, yeah!" for me, because it was easier to only tell one guy *no* than a whole line of them. At the same time, when guys that *were* a "Hell, yeah!" came along, I'd play really hard to get and they'd rarely pan out.

I also became conflicted about my physical appearance. Part of me wanted to avoid being seen as physically attractive because I didn't want the attention that I'd eventually have to ward off. Another part of me wanted to be seen as pretty, sexy, beautiful and attractive—because deep down I knew that's what I was, and why should I deny that?

I had a similar relationship with food. I loved food, but started to see certain foods as forbidden because they would make me fat. I would deny myself

the pleasure of eating foods I liked, and then I would binge on them when I couldn't stand the avoidance any more.

By my early twenties, this developed into full-blown bulimia. I started self-induced vomiting after binging on large quantities of food because I was afraid of gaining weight. I was trying to perform as a long-distance runner at a Division 1 collegiate level at the time, and blamed my body when the performance wasn't there. I wasn't fit, strong, thin or ripped enough. I tried to sculpt my body into a high-performance machine. Controlling food was essential in that plan.

It's easy to attribute an eating disorder to the goal of looking a certain way, but that only scratches the surface and doesn't do justice to all that is going on. I was trying to create an *identity* with which I was okay. If I could transform into someone I could be proud of, a superstar (and sexy) athlete, then I wouldn't have to carry the shame around anymore about who I really was—the good kid who didn't get in trouble, who's book smart but not so street smart, a virgin and a Christian.

When you attempt to redefine yourself without really understanding who you truly are, you end up doing a two-step dance that I call *trying and hiding*. It's a way of covering up the shame and presenting to the world a more lovable, more acceptable you. This was my M.O. for years: hiding that I was harming my body, that I was afraid of being honest with men and that my true feelings might not simultaneously keep my family, God and the church happy. I was afraid of

rejection and never felt like I was enough. *Trying and hiding* was a way of controlling everything in order to be enough and earn acceptance. It was also a way of covering up access to my true thoughts, feelings and beliefs, and any chance of expressing them.

To heal from bulimia I had to accept all of me, including my sexuality. I've had to realize that sex is not *bad*, in the same way I had to learn that fat is not *bad*. I had to recognize the judgments that I was placing on sex and myself as a sexual being, and I had to learn to let go of expectations. Terms like *good, bad, perfect* and *total failure* weren't doing me any favors. I had to find a new option that reflects what is really true for me.

My two options for sex had been: *Yes, if you're married, No, if you're not*. My new option? Embrace who you are as a sexual being first, before you even start to think about expressing yourself in that way with someone else, regardless of marital status. Otherwise you end up falling into that *trying and hiding* trap, and that's no good for anyone.

Part of my healing has been detaching my femininity from my sexuality. Instead of vacillating between putting my body on display or covering myself up, finding ways to enhance and accentuate my body's beauty without making me feel like a sex symbol is relatively new territory for me, but a Godsend. I've also had to drop the *victim* mentality when it comes to sex. For a long time I blamed things outside of me for how I've felt and behaved sexually. No more.

This journey of exploring all that I am as a sexual and feminine being is as beautiful now as it previously was painful. It's been freeing to acknowledge that I've always been curious about sex; that I've wanted to experience this orgasmic euphoria and mind-altering state of being I kept hearing about. No more hiding that this is me!

And also that it's okay that I was confused about how to act as a sexual being. It doesn't mean that something is wrong with me (or you).

I've come clean with God, too, admitting that while part of me wanted to wait until I was married to have sexual experiences, what I really wanted was the promise of the amazing feeling, the intimacy and the love (which I'm not really sure God promises anyway; perhaps my mom or the church did). You owe this to yourself, too. You *have* to believe and own your own beliefs about sex (and anything else in life) for you. Playing by somebody else's rules is never going to get you where you want to be.

One of the loveliest parts of this journey has been learning to surrender—letting go of the control I had so desperately been holding on to all my life—in and out of the bedroom. As I've been able to let go of control in my life and just relax and enjoy life, I've been able to do that in bed, too. Instead of trying to get *results*, I can be open to taking the lead from my husband, trust that everything is perfect the way it is and ease into the physical and emotional intimacy of the moment. Maybe I orgasm, maybe I don't, but instead of that *trying and hiding* pattern (trying to keep him happy in bed and hiding that I have no clue

what I'm doing), I can practice honesty and just say what is true for me now: *I would like this. I'm not sure about that. This feels XYZ to me.* It's called authenticity. It creates dialogue, connection and intimacy.

I've had to resolve the whole God, church, marriage thing as well. It is true, that my choices and confusion with sex have impacted my marriage. There isn't a magic wand on your wedding night that changes everything, bringing easy and euphoric sex and intimacy. There has been hurt and distrust, but also healing in the cards for both of us. As I've worked to release old patterns, my husband has been willing to be a part of the forgiving and healing process. It's brought us closer. I think that is the biggest testament to God's love.

I realize now that my sexuality and my femininity are beautiful. They are there to embrace. God thinks so, too—otherwise they, and I, wouldn't be here in the first place.

This journey of accepting that I am enough just as I am, and resting in this, lets me be free to be me—all of me, including the sexual, feminine, beautiful woman that I am.

Kendra Tanner guides women so they can live as their True You, empowering them to experience a life full of love, joy and authentic self-expression. Kendra has been on her own True You journey, including overcoming an eating disorder, embracing her femininity and challenging the status quo of a childhood faith. She's learned that the core culprits of fear, shame and living under expectations keep us from accessing our true identity, and so her work helps others peel back these layers.
www.thetrueyouproject.com



“Most anything can happen when a young woman decides to commit to her fantasies.” – Lana Fox



Good Pure Girl: From Cult Survivor to Erotica Writer

by Lana Fox

At age seventeen on my first-ever date, my twenty-five-year-old boyfriend forced me into oral sex. I was in his car outside my parents' house, slightly tipsy because we'd been to the pub. I hardly knew this man at all. We'd met because we were both in an amateur play and he'd given me a ride home. There we were, kissing, mouths open (my first kiss, as it happens) when he suddenly pushed me, face-down, towards his lap. I was thrown, until I noticed he'd unzipped his pants and was fully erect beneath me. He put pressure on the back of my head until, open-mouthed, I let him fill me with his sex, and I did what seemed like the natural thing to do, given I guessed he knew more about sex than I did. His expectation made me think I had no choice but to give him head.

With his penis in my mouth, I kept choking. He thrust and I bore it. I felt horrible, used. But I did nothing because I'd been taught strange things about sex. I'd probably have told him to stop, if it wasn't for sexual shame.

I was brought up in Christian Science, which is often quoted as being one of the largest religious cults in America and Britain. My parents took our religion very seriously, which meant dishing out what they perceived as a healthy dose of sexual shame. They taught me that sex was dirty and degrading, and that

it was natural for a good, upright woman to feel pain and degradation during sex.

Here are a few “facts” my parents taught me:

Only cheap women have sex with a man before they are wearing a wedding band.

If a woman “gives herself” to a man before they are married, he will never respect her and she’ll lose his interest. In fact, the only way for a woman to get a man to propose is by not “giving in” to him sexually.

Sex only takes place between a man and a woman. Any other kind of sex is unnatural.

Once a woman marries a man, it’s cruel of her to refuse him sexual pleasure. He needs pleasure for health reasons. And if she rejects his sexual advances partway through, he’ll enter a dangerous physical shock.

If a woman has sex outside of marriage, she is likely (even if contraception is used) to become pregnant. Having a baby outside of wedlock ruins your life because everybody shames you and nobody helps you.

For a moral woman, sex is always physically painful. There is no such thing as sexual pleasure, unless the woman is cheap and distasteful. Men,

on the other hand, can't help but be afflicted by a physical dependency on sex.

My parents believed that I was a good, pure girl, and that I'd never do anything that they saw as "cheap." So I didn't feel I could inquire about different options.

If I was "cheap," if I was a "slut," I was in it alone.

Christian Science also teaches that the body is not real. Rather, the body is a lie—an illusion, if you will—while Spirit, which is "of God," is seen as the only real truth.

When I tell people this they often say, "How could anyone believe that the body isn't real?" But for me, it made good sense. As a kid, I spent most of my childhood feeling like I was not in my body. I'd look down at my hand and it would seem fake and plastic. When I gazed into the mirror, my features would swim around, as if my nose, eyes, and mouth were drifting on water, getting farther apart and closer together. I'd wonder why other people seemed to think their bodies were real. It just didn't seem possible. This life seemed so dull and pretend.

Little did I realize that I was suffering from *dissociation*. As a result of the trauma I'd suffered, this life and everything in it had become dim and faded. I was literally trying to leave the physical world.

The only way in which my body seemed real was sexually and in terms of pain. I was an easily aroused girl, able to fantasize vividly and feel the effects in my body—and for that, I'm especially grateful. "It is easier for Christianity to cast out sickness than sin," wrote

Mary Baker Eddy in the Christian Science holy book, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, “for the sick are more willing to part with pain than are sinners to give up the sinful, so-called pleasure of the senses.” In order to heal from the “illusion” of pain, physical or emotional, the Christian Scientist was taught to believe, “I am perfect and pain-free, just as God made me.” That’s how spiritual healing would arise, the religion teaches: by having faith that pain and the body don’t exist in spiritual truth.

When I’d go to my father in pain, instead of suggesting I take a painkiller (drugs are the opposite of God in Christian Science) he’d tell me, “We’ll just know that everything is perfect in God.” And that was the end of the matter.

By age ten or eleven, I could rarely complain about physical or emotional pain without being told I wasn’t really in pain. Yet I’d been taught that sex was pain for a good woman, because good women found sex disgusting and hurtful. Frankly, the mixed messages were confounding.

So years later, when my boyfriend pushed his penis into my mouth and I felt discomfort and pain, I didn’t tell him to stop; why would I? I knew that what was happening was sexual, so I deemed the pain normal (and not spiritually real anyway). I also assumed I should deal with the pain by denying it, as I’d been taught.

The fact that I couldn’t rely on my parents for guidance, having chosen to have sex outside of marriage gave me all the more reason to avoid complaining. So I let myself endure the painful

assault. And two nights later, on our next date, I did so again. And I kept doing so, over the course of about eight more weeks. I believed I'd have to marry this man, a man I didn't love or even particularly like, now that I'd granted him all this sexual pleasure.

My salvation came in the form of solo sex. Self-stimulating oneself was considered so deeply sinful that my parents had never mentioned it. When I began bringing myself to orgasm, I believed I'd get pregnant. That's how God would punish me, I thought, in the same way God had praised the Virgin Mary. But I couldn't stop touching myself. This pleasure was wonderful. And I thought I could keep it a secret.

But then I developed my first yeast infection and made the profound mistake of describing the symptoms to my mother. Her eyes flared with anger and she forcefully grabbed my wrist. In a shaming, accusatory tone, she said, "You haven't been playing with yourself, have you?"

"No," I said, "of course not!"

Her reaction only seemed to confirm how shameful taking pleasure in my own body was. And now I believed that masturbation could be poisonous to me, spurring infectious disease.

While I vowed to give it up, I couldn't seem to stop touching myself. I needed the pleasure, the release.

I also couldn't escape the feeling that through masturbation, my body was trying to tell me something. I often imagined I was a man making love to a woman. What did this make me? Disgusting, I believed; that's what I felt Christian Science would say.

But my body and my deep, unconscious mind told me, “You are attracted to women. This is who you are.”

I made many mistakes after this, including marrying someone who wasn’t right for me, and suffering through intense pain during sex without letting him know. I faked orgasms to try and keep him happy, and committed to a life of painful, pleasureless sex. Then finally I began healing, through therapy and erotic writing.

Therapy showed me that what I’d been taught had been traumatic—the makings of misery and self-abuse. Erotic writing brought the beginning of self-embracement, though I didn’t realize it at the time.

It all started one day when I randomly picked up Anaïs Nin’s erotic collection *Delta of Venus* in a bookstore. Remarkably, it held sexual fantasies in its pages that were similar to my own. I had considered myself warped and crude because of these inner fantasies. Finally, I realized I wasn’t alone.

Published by Penguin, Nin’s collection changed my life. Certainly, she had been paid good money for writing and publishing stories like these. I reasoned then that many people must have found her fantasies valuable. Over time, I began writing my own erotica.

Other authors began to play their part as well. Jilly Cooper, the British “bonkbuster” writer who rivaled Jackie Collins, was a lot less intense than Anaïs Nin, but her page-turning novels, filled with boisterous “rumpy pumpy” (as it’s often called in Britain!) and over-the-top characters provided a laugh a minute. Influenced by writers like Cooper and Nin, I started a novel containing my own fantasies, including

characters who were sexually confident and, compared to me at the time, powerfully liberated.

Even so, my dissociation continued. I escaped my body during sexual fantasy, rather than remaining within it. I stayed very much “in the head” and “in the imagination”, which was the only way I could climax back then. What’s more, I was not a figure in my fantasies. My mind watched other characters that I’d created doing the things they longed to do. I associated with their longings, but didn’t own them.

All the same, I kept on writing, enjoying myself at the keyboard, releasing myself through my work.

Meanwhile, my then-husband was offered an enviable job in America. Both Brits, we’d lived in England all our lives, and the thought of moving abroad was nerve-wracking. I could only join him in America, according to the available visa, if I agreed to earn no money, have no social security number, staying financially dependent on him.

I decided, in the end, to go with him and write.

I would write novels. I would learn my craft.

I would become.

In some ways, my life in America was extremely lonely. When people asked what I did for a living, I’d say, “I write.”

“What books have you published?” they’d follow.

When I’d explain my visa situation they’d clam up, awkward, unable to connect with the dependency that constricted me.

I also felt more dissociated than ever. Try living in America without a social security number! You can’t

even open a bank account. If you're lucky enough to get one, as I was, by sharing one with a spouse, you can't even phone your bank without those magic "last four numbers." And that's just one of countless examples.

On the other hand, I was privileged. I learned my craft and started publishing my erotica. This brought shame, a hangover from the trauma I'd experienced, but also a deep sense of pride. I was out in public, being sexual on the page.

My then-husband, who I cared about greatly, didn't want to read my writing—which was also a lonely reality for me. In turn, it pushed me into the light. I realized I needed others who would read my erotic work, and slowly but steadily, I found a community. I found out about Susie Bright's podcast, "In Bed with Susie Bright," and read the diaries of Anaïs Nin, which were even sexier than her erotic stories. They were also profound and emotional. She taught me that our erotic side can be transformative and passionate. It can be frothy too, of course—but the transformative elements most impacted me. Nin showed me that my erotic self mattered.

Without Anaïs Nin, Susie Bright and other erotic writers and activists, I wouldn't have had the courage to leave a marriage in which there was no passion, no intensity and no erotic closeness. I gradually wrote and read my way out of my marriage.

And, having been taught by my erotic mind that I liked to fantasize that I was a man in the bedroom, I began to explore seriously for the first time that I

might be queer too. As you can imagine, this changed everything.

Before I met my wife and soulmate, Angela, I still had some work to do. I managed to get my green card—an amazing feat!—and moved out of my first marriage. I moved in with a group of sex-positive activists and began walking my talk, taking on free work as a sex columnist for a local magazine, teaching erotic writing and writing for various sex-positive publications. I somehow made the pennies meet. In my divorce, I hadn't asked for everything I should have. But of all the things I could afford, I prioritized my erotic self-love. I now had a brand new bed of my own, and furnished it with all kinds of wonderful goodies—sex toys, erotica and lovely aftercare products, like creams and essential oils. It was a lovely time.

I had sex with a couple of trusted friends during that time, but, for the most part, I had an affair with myself. In fact, on Valentine's Day, I took myself out to the Trident Bookstore in Boston, where they had a relaxed, casual café, and bought a new book, a meal and glass of wine.

Absolute heaven.

I was learning to cherish my affair with myself, so much so, in fact, that I figured I was relatively embodied now. (In my experience, it's a strange thing, embodiment: it's not really possible to know that you lack it until you find it.)

I met Angela in a writing class I was teaching. She, like me, was writing about sex and relationships. After the course was finished, we became friends, then

lovers. Angela wasn't like anyone else I'd slept with. She could tell that I wasn't in my body during sex, that I wasn't present, that I was leaving the room. She told me she felt lonely when I climaxed, because I wasn't there. We decided to work at my sexual embodiment together, as a couple.

We had success. After all, I trusted her, and both of us really wanted me to heal. But the big breakthrough happened very suddenly—a fact that often surprises people when I tell the story. We're so used to sexual trauma being a great, big, lasting thing, that the idea of healing from it in a snap can be a little dizzying. But that's how it happened.

Interestingly, it also happened thanks to an erotic story.

We weren't writing this story, however. We were playing with it. Angela played the role of a housemistress at a boarding school (I had been to Christian Science boarding school myself, so this was a fun game!), and I was playing the role of the naughty young girl who plays with herself when she shouldn't. My housemistress, however, thought that my masturbation was the hottest thing ever. She wanted to watch me, to see what I did. Playing the “present adult” she did the very opposite of what my childhood had done to me. She was proud of me, her “dirty little girl.” She found me inspiring.

When I climaxed during this fantasy, I became part of the fantasy. I felt myself climaxing in the present moment, in my body, on the bed. I could feel the room around me and Angela's embrace, so vividly and clearly—as I'd never felt during sex before. The

fantasy with my kind, supportive lover helped me to remain in my body, in myself. In that bed, I began to live my erotica, or rather *our* erotica. After all, we were creating it together, right there in the moment, entirely safe.

And just like that, I was healed.

It would be foolish to say that I didn't have any more problems with embodiment. To this day, I have issues. I also know that healing from dissociation takes all different forms, depending on who you are. But as soon as I became aware of what it was to be present, everything changed. I finally trusted and understood.

Now, years later, my beautiful partner and I co-run an erotic press called Go Deeper, so named because we know the depths that erotic fantasy can reach. We publish erotic stories for everyone, understanding that they can be fun and bring healing. Our authors are hugely talented, and we have a wonderful, sex-positive community, including on social media where we're friends with sex writers across the globe. We are fortunate to live our activism on a daily basis.

Most anything can happen when a young woman decides to commit to her fantasies. If there's one thing I recommend, dear reader, it's that you trust what you experience inside.

Lana Fox is Co-Founder of Go Deeper Press, where she and her partner publish erotic books and more. Her novels include *The Break-Up Billionaire* series (e.g. *Criminally Gorgeous* and *Criminally Steamy*), *Cream: An Erotic Romance* (Go Deeper Press), and *Confessions of a Kinky Divorcee* (Harper Collins: Mischief). She has also edited numerous erotic anthologies, including *Shameless Behavior: Brazen Stories of Overcoming Shame*, and has written non-fiction for Gaiam TV, Spirituality & Health, and elsewhere. Find her at godeeperpress.com and lanafox.com.



“Maybe part of me is still that young girl, fighting back against those bullies who dared name me a ‘slut.’” — Kitt Crescendo



“SLUT”-SHAMING

If I could eradicate one word from the English language, “slut” would be it. Used to shame girls and women for expressing their sexuality as they see fit, dressing particular ways, having large or early-blooming breasts or, the most tragic case scenario, for being victimized by sexual assault, the mere existence of the word “slut” (with no male equivalent, mind you) says a lot about our culture. In my opinion, “slut”-shaming is really woman-shaming—and it has to stop.

Some women have chosen to reclaim the word “slut” as something empowering, but in most cases, it’s used for shaming and ridicule. I tend to steer on the side of eliminating the word altogether. Regardless, what matters most is ending the bullying. We’re probably all guilty at some point of “slut”-shaming, whether we criticize a woman for dressing in a “slutty” Halloween costume or silently shun ourselves for our sexual thoughts or behaviors. I hope the following two stories shed light not only on the damage such bullying can cause but important ways we can help stop it.

Kitt Crescendo appeared on my Girl Boner® Radio episode, “Kinky Christian” (yes, she considers herself both). Emily Lindin appeared in another episode, to discuss her work to put an end to “slut”-shaming through her brainchild, The UnSlut Project. Both women experienced sexual bullying in their youth and have not only survived and healed, but gone on to become advocates for positive change.

“Slut”: a Strong Loving Unbroken Treasure

by Kitt Crescendo

There are certain words that will never be okay for some people. They're as toxic to their souls as poison. For me, those words are “slut” and “whore.” What prompts this sort of visceral response? Memories I wish I could forget, but never will.

My early youth was pretty charmed. I was never the girl who was unsure of herself. My sense of self-worth came from the love of my family, faith in God and the innate belief that good is the driving force in this world, despite all the crazy twists and turns. Yes, I truly believe in happy endings. I was pretty lucky, but life rarely stays the same.

Sometimes circumstances change things in ways we never expected—but like I said, life is never 100 percent smooth sailing. When I was ten years old, I was molested by a family friend. Although he didn't take my virginity, he stole a bit of my innocence. Thanks to a strong, supportive mother and great friends, I was quickly removed from harm's way. It didn't change that the impact was made; the damage done.

When traumatic events and a warrior's spirit meet, an activist is born and her fate is sealed. That's how I see myself today, though that wasn't always the case. Back then, I only knew that a battle had begun and my foundation had been shaken. Instinct screamed that, left unchecked, this small moment in my life had the ability to tarnish my soul and change

me for the worse. My gut told me it was time to learn more about the emotional and mental repercussions of experiences like mine.

Looking back, I'm not even sure where I read it or whether it was even accurate, but this stood out to me: *Victims of abuse who don't seek professional help tend to act in one of two extremes: they either become extremely promiscuous, confusing sex with love and acceptance, or they become so fearful of sexual intimacy or contact that they are unable to handle any at all.* I didn't want any of that for myself. I needed the love and intimacy I'd always dreamed of before the abuse happened. I craved the romance I'd read about in books, and I didn't want to be afraid.

So I worked hard on me. I made a conscious effort to understand myself—my fears and motivations. I taught myself to take things slowly, to set boundaries and expectations with the boys I dated early and to make sure that they understood the consequences of disregarding my ground rules. I also learned to listen to myself and to trust my instincts. If someone sent my spidey senses tingling, I walked away. I didn't question my fear.

Making those decisions and learning to talk about my concerns with people I trusted or write my emotions down on paper helped me. My innate flirt had no problems coming out to play. My confidence and sense of fun definitely caught a lot of attention, and it was amazing how much guys responded to both my self-respect and my ground rules. I was becoming the 'me' I could be proud of.

But words can hurt, tear down and destroy. Triggers crop up when you least expect them. When I overheard a close family friend telling my mom she needed to get my flirting under control because “if she doesn’t, Kitt will be pregnant by the time she’s sixteen,” it devastated me.

That day I learned it was possible to be both a virgin and “slut”-shamed. I was a virgin who had indulged in nothing but flirting and kissing, but I’d already been tried and convicted. She, a grown woman with children of her own, had already decided I was doomed to promiscuity, and stamped her label on my psyche. Something about those words brought memories of my past abuse to the forefront and made me feel dirty and ashamed.

I dwelled on that comment for a while. The injustice of her careless words nearly suffocated me, making me feel betrayed and angry. Part of me wanted to confront her but decided it wasn’t worth the effort. I didn’t want to give her the satisfaction of knowing she’d hurt me. I had my pride in spades, thank God. In retrospect, she probably would’ve been mortified if she knew I’d overheard, but that’s the thing about words. They can’t be taken back, and once they’re out, the damage is done.

Fortunately, my rages don’t tend to be self-destructive or I might have thrown caution to the wind. Instead, logic set in and I decided that I was going to prove her wrong; make her eat her words, even if she never knew it. Sadly, that time was not the last time I would hear those words.

A month into my freshman year at a new high school, a childhood friend from church approached me and asked me how many boyfriends I'd had. The comment seemed innocuous enough, so I told him the truth. I hadn't dated anyone since I'd transferred at the beginning of the school year. I was too busy grieving my brother's death (he'd passed away late that summer), and didn't feel I was in any condition to take on a relationship.

My friend nodded and told me that I should probably know that, according to the rumor mill, I'd already dated about ten guys. Doing the math, I realized that would've meant a new boyfriend every three days. As if grief wasn't enough, my school had decided to compound my already damaged emotions by labeling me "class slut." The friend who told me was the kind one. A couple of weeks later I discovered that a guy one grade above me had been advised to talk to me because, in the words of one of his friends, "I guarantee that if you ask her out on a date, you'll get laid by the end of it."

Again. Still a virgin. Still hadn't done anything but flirt and kiss.

Thankfully, my pride and past confidence came to my rescue. My ego and rage combined to protect me. Chin came up. Head stayed high. There was no way I would give these people the satisfaction of knowing how badly their words devastated me. It was more than just the typical bullying, whether they knew it or not. They had inadvertently tapped into my biggest fear based on one of the worst violations that had ever happened to me. But damned if I was going to let them

win. Tears were reserved for my pillow at home, and only when I was alone.

It was during those dark years that I did a lot of soul searching and realized I had a choice—to let their words mold me into the fearful, uptight person they wanted me to conform to becoming, or to be the proud, strong person I could face in my mirror. My decision was simple. Changing schools my junior year helped me regain my footing more quickly.

Still, thoughts of those kids and their cruel words bothered me. I felt compelled for the first time to speak out and try to make a difference. I approached one of my former teachers and asked her what she thought of me sharing my story with her current students with the hope that maybe I could evoke change. She and several of the other teachers were amazingly receptive. I discovered that they'd realized the underhanded bullying that had been happening to me, but because it hadn't been overt, they really couldn't act.

So, with her permission, I revisited the place of some of my worst memories and had the opportunity to speak. My audience consisted of four classes from seventh grade to sophomores. My hope for making a big change wasn't much, but I thought, *If I can just get through to one person, maybe all this hurt will be worth it.*

Getting up in front of these kids was surprisingly difficult, despite having grown up performing. This was nothing like singing or sharing my poetry. This was vulnerability and laying my soul wide open in a way I'd never done before. Of course, it didn't surprise

me at all when, in between classes, I overheard some girls talking about how they thought the whole thing was stupid. “Who does she think she is?” one said.

Then I overheard one of the girls’ older brothers, a former schoolmate who was one class behind me, tell her that she really needed to shut up and listen to what I was saying, that my message was powerful and that I’d been victimized firsthand. That I knew, therefore I spoke. Someone not only heard me, but had taken it to heart! It was a small but meaningful step for me. It affirmed that I was discovering a purpose—my voice.

Although that was the last time I did any organized speaking on the message of kindness, “slut”-shaming and other bullying, I found myself in one-on-one mentoring roles through the years. It felt as though God had a way of sending young women to me when they were most in need of strength and direction.

When three upset young ladies stopped by my apartment a couple years later in tears, looking for a place to hide from a youth group meeting because a guy had called them “sluts,” I encouraged them to fight fire with fire. With a little pep talk about hatred, jealousy and facing it head on, we decided it was time to send a message. I found sexy, flirty tops that showed off our assets, put some makeup on and walked them back to that youth group meeting.

Maybe it was a small thing, but I realized that having me there to stand beside them gave them the courage not to accept that judgment. Not to hide. And definitely not to be ashamed of the beautiful, vivacious women they were becoming. Even better, their

confidence seemed to grow as they discovered the power of allies and friendships. Most of the people in that youth group responded in a positive way, opening their arms and including them, which, in turn, left the bully the odd man out to wallow in his own bitterness.

It's been years since those days, but they changed me at the core. They taught me to choose my words carefully and be the friend I want to have. Most importantly, though, it taught me that I have a powerful voice. It was that belief that gave me the courage to openly speak out about issues that matter to me.

Maybe part of me is still that young girl, fighting back against those bullies who dared name me a "slut." Maybe it's simply my way of trying to help other people understand that there's nothing wrong or dirty about sex, but rather the shaming and judgment that seem to follow it. If I can help open eyes or empower someone else to shut down the harsh opinions of haters, or even better, not give the bigots the ability to destroy other women's already fragile egos, then it's a win. Not just for me, but for women everywhere.

Kitt Crescendo is an erotica author and passionate advocate of women's personal and sexual empowerment. She loves to connect through social media and her website:
theinnerwildkat.wordpress.com.



“And once we stop participating in ‘slut’ shaming other girls and women, it becomes a lot easier to stop ‘slut’ shaming ourselves.” — Emily Lindin



Sexual Bullying and the Swing Set

by Emily Lindin

My family moved to a new town the year I started fifth grade. Unlike the town we were moving from, this new town was known for its fantastic public school system. The adults who lived there didn't have Boston accents. Many of them belonged to local country clubs. Very few of them had tattoos. My new classmates noticed right away that my body didn't look like the other ten-year-old girls' bodies. I already had breasts and, about a month into the new school year, I was the first among my classmates to get my period. I liked wearing leggings (which I called "stretch pants") but I didn't like the way people looked at me when I wore them. It was, as you might imagine, an uncomfortable time for me.

I immediately became best friends with a girl whose family had also just moved to town from a lower-middle-class suburb. Her name was Steph and I thought she knew everything. She wasn't developing physically as quickly as I was, but she shaved her legs and told me that she'd had boyfriends. Steph had blonde hair, which she lightened with Sun-In, and freckly skin, which she darkened with spray-on self-tanner. The Sun-In and the self-tanner combined to make her appear rather orange—at least that's how I remember her. Steph's parents smoked cigarettes, which she pilfered and stashed in her bedroom. When we first met, she showed me how to smoke one in the woods behind her house, carefully instructing me to

tuck my lips slightly under so the end of the cigarette wouldn't get all spitty.

One day at recess, a few months into the school year, Steph and I sat on a bench near the basketball court pretending not to watch the boys play. Steph looked over my shoulder and gasped, mid-sentence. I followed her gaze, but at first I didn't know what she was staring at. I only saw the swing set, which didn't interest me because most of our classmates usually spent recess playing basketball or gossiping on benches. The popular kids in this town, I had surmised, were inordinately committed to appearing not to care much about anything at all. That was a hard look to pull off while pumping your legs earnestly on a swing, so the swing set was usually vacant.

Today though, one girl sat on the swing closest to our bench. Her name was Tori and she didn't have a single friend at school. On my first day as a new student, she had introduced herself to me and smiled before a concerned classmate had whisked me away, instructing me never to speak to Tori again if I didn't want to be a social outcast for the rest of my life. I felt bad for Tori, but I wasn't brave. I never stood up for her.

That day on the playground, Steph whispered, "Look at Tori. Look what she's doing."

It wasn't immediately clear to me *what* Tori was doing, other than sitting the wrong way on her swing, her legs on either side of it instead of stretched out in front of her. She was facing away from us, grasping the chain that held up one side of the swing she straddled, and she rocked forward and backward very slightly. It

didn't make any sense to me, but I wasn't about to let Steph know that.

Luckily, before my silence betrayed my ignorance, Steph continued: "*She's humping the swing.*"

I had never heard the word "humping" before, but watching Tori, I knew immediately what it meant. A few months earlier, while falling asleep with a pillow between my legs, I'd had my first orgasm almost by accident. Although it had surprised me, it felt like an *answer*. Finally, it all made sense: the electricity I felt when boys stood close to me; the new, exciting feeling that overcame me when I heard people talking about sex; my sudden interest in romance novels—well, in reading certain sections of them over and over again, anyway. Once I had found the answer, it seemed unbelievable to me that everyone in the world wasn't masturbating constantly. This feeling was so much better than every other possible feeling and it was immediately attainable. *All the time*. I began looking askance at adults: did they *know*? They must know. Did they know that *I* knew? The idea was unbearably humiliating. Whatever this new, amazing experience was, I knew it was definitely something I had to keep a secret.

I don't remember my first reaction when Steph told me what Tori was doing on the swing. Maybe it was relief that someone else my age had figured this thing out, too. Maybe it was resentment that Tori got to be masturbating—the most fun thing ever!—while I sat on a bench pretending not to care about anything. Maybe it was empathy, but I doubt it, because I responded with malice.

I grabbed Steph by the arm and pulled her over to a nearby group of girls. They weren't necessarily the *most* popular girls, but they did an okay job at looking supremely indifferent to the world around them. The group included the girl who had pulled me away from Tori on the first day of school. Sensing that we had something juicy to share, they welcomed us into their circle.

With my heart pounding and my eyes sparkling conspiratorially, I informed them that Tori was humping a swing. After a quick confirming glance in the direction of the swing set, the group scattered to spread the news across the playground. It would have been better if I had just yelled so everyone could hear, "Tori is humping the swing!" Because then, at least, Tori would have been notified along with everyone else.

Instead she continued on, heartbreakingly oblivious to the shocked gasps, the curious stares and the mocking giggles bubbling up all around her. After a few devastating minutes, a teacher who must have overheard all this walked over to Tori, whispered something to her and gently led her into the school building. Tori stared down at the ground as she walked, not looking up even when the taunts grew louder. I averted my eyes and went back to the bench with Steph.

After recess, we all filed back into our respective classrooms. About halfway into the next lesson, the school guidance counselor took me out of class. Ms. O'Connell was wonderfully cut out for her job. She emanated peacefulness and acceptance but also came

across as powerful. I wanted her to like me. My stomach lurched when, upon arriving at Ms. O'Connell's office haven of throw pillows and colorful lampshades, I found Tori sitting on the other side of the round table that took up most of the room. Steph was there, too, rolling her eyes. A CD of pan flute music played unobtrusively. I sat down in the empty chair and looked at Steph, who shrugged.

Ms. O'Connell told us that she knew what had happened at recess and that she and Tori had reason to believe Steph and I were the instigators of the whole thing. We denied it; we said we knew nothing about how Tori had spent her time at recess and, come to think of it, what did "humping" even *mean*? We didn't know. We were just kids.

Ms. O'Connell looked back at us with sad eyes. She tried a different tactic, asking us why we thought we should make fun of someone for masturbating. She said she wouldn't be surprised if we, too, were just discovering that touching our bodies in certain ways felt good.

"Maybe you've accidentally found that if you sit on a chair a certain way, it feels different?" she asked.

I tried to maintain eye contact with Ms. O'Connell and, at the same time, to observe how Steph was reacting to these suggestions.

"No!" Steph scoffed to my left.

"Okay, Steph, no. What about you, Emily?"

I looked at Ms. O'Connell's stern but hopeful expression. I glanced at Tori, who was hunched over, pressing a tissue against her eyes with both hands. I didn't dare look at Steph.

“Ew.” I said. “No way. Tori’s gross.”

Ms. O’Connell didn’t break eye contact with me right away, but her eyes changed. *Did she know?* Finally, she sat back in her chair, placed a hand on Tori’s arm.

“All right,” she said. “I’m going to stay here with Tori. Emily and Steph, please go.”

We giggled uncontrollably the whole way back to class.

Later that afternoon, while we stood outside in lines to wait for our school buses to arrive, Steph nudged me and motioned toward the line next to ours. It was Tori. She stood looking down at the ground, while everyone else in the line seemed to be pretending she wasn’t there.

I couldn’t bring myself to look at Tori, so I watched Steph instead. If I hadn’t known she was looking at Tori, I would have thought that she’d finally caught a loud, persistent mosquito after hours of swatting at it and, after one successful swat, was watching its squirmy death with a mixture of disgust and sweet satisfaction.

About a year later, Steph would look at *me* that same way. She and the rest of my classmates would decide that I was nothing more than a “slut” and they would spend the next few years treating me accordingly. My book, *UnSlut: A Diary and a Memoir*, comprises the diary I kept during that time and reflections on what it meant to be labeled the school “slut” as an eleven year old. My middle school experience inspired me to start The UnSlut Project,

which uses personal story sharing to work against sexual bullying and what has now been termed “slut shaming.” I won’t rehash it all here, but suffice it to say, it was awful.

I felt completely worthless, no more than fodder for my classmates’ rumors and cruel jokes. It was, I imagine, similar to how Tori must have felt because of the way I treated her. We might not have called it “slut” shaming that day in Ms. O’Connell’s office, but that’s what we were doing to Tori.

What strikes me now is that even though I was experimenting with masturbation myself, I didn’t hesitate to bully Tori for it. She and I were going through the same thing, but rather than stand up for her publicly or confide in her privately, I turned against her.

Throughout middle school and high school, even while my classmates were sexually bullying me on a daily basis, I found ways to target other girls for hooking up with boys or dressing “slutty.” In college and into my twenties, while I dated and had casual sex with many men, I had no problem dismissing a fellow woman as a “dumb slut” for having once dated a guy I was interested in, or for wearing more makeup than I happened to be wearing.

Clearly I’d become a hypocrite, and unfortunately, I was far from alone. My behavior was so common that it proved unremarkable; in fact, it would have been noteworthy if someone had just said, “Hey, knock it off.” But sometimes, that’s all it takes. “Slut” shaming might not always be as obvious as what I did to Tori that day in fifth grade, or the sexual bullying I endured

throughout middle school. But at any age, once we start noticing “slut shaming,” we can make the conscious decision to stop participating in it.

And once we stop participating in “slut” shaming other girls and women, it becomes a lot easier to stop “slut” shaming ourselves. This might seem backward. But when it comes to sex, recognizing and understanding our own insecurities, preferences and fantasies can be terrifying, especially for women. Giving other women a break is a good way to get comfortable with the idea of giving *ourselves* a break. So *what* if the neighbor who has two children also likes to wear low-cut dresses? Maybe we can follow her lead! Maybe we, too, can be comfortable as both a mother and a sexual being. So *what* if that teenager shared photos of her breasts with her boyfriend? Maybe we’d like to spice up our own sex life a bit with some fun photo sessions. If we turn the temptation to “slut” shaming on its head and use it as an opportunity to open our minds, we might even discover something new about ourselves. Then we have the ability to go even farther and start *celebrating* our sexuality!

We can—and should—take inspiration from one another. It will take a lot of work to undo the patriarchy. It doesn’t fall solely on the shoulders of women, of course, but a good first step is choosing to support one another. By thinking critically about our own assumptions, making the decision to celebrate ourselves and other women, and modeling that behavior for the girls in our lives, we can make real change for ourselves and for all the future Toris, Emilys, and Steps.

Emily Lindin is the founder of *The UnSlut Project*, an online community where survivors of sexual bullying and “slut” shaming can share their stories, and where girls who are currently suffering can find support and solidarity. The UnSlut Project was inspired by Emily’s own experiences: at age eleven, she was labeled a “slut” by her classmates and was bullied at school, after school, and online. She is now a Harvard graduate pursuing her PhD in California, and her middle school diary has become *UnSlut: A Diary and a Memoir* (Zest Books, 2015). For more about Emily Lindin and *The UnSlut Project*, visit her website at unslutproject.com.



“I have earned my growth and my scars. I have earned my right to enjoy and to wallow.” — Lea Grover



BODY IMAGE

Body image. Where do I begin? Shaming thoughts about one's own body run fierce and rampant in our culture—so much so that it's become a rare and almost rebellious act to embrace your physical self. If we don't, how can we possibly cultivate positive sexual self-esteem and embracement? The reserve is also true. We can't fully accept and respect our bodies if we draw an impassable line just above the genitals.

You don't need to run around oohing and ahing at your aesthetics; trust me, that's not the goal. Body positivity is all about honor, respect and gratitude. The more body-embracement you let flourish in your life, the less you'll judge yourself and others and the freer you will be to have a gratifying life and relationships. To gain those rewards, you've got to make the often difficult-to-make decision to not settle for anything less. Take it from two women who've done so.

Alchemy of Self

by Lea Grover

I was twelve years old, discovering the joy of a body becoming round and sultry long before my peers, when I began to learn about sexual consequence. My older sister, only fifteen herself, had plummeted headfirst into a world of promiscuity and exhibitionism. She carted me and our younger sister around for the ride—whether to make herself look older by comparison or to show off to us, I don't know. She brought us through drug dens and after parties, theatrical readings and museum campuses, surrounded by throngs of college students and dropouts whose enlightened Gen X ideals kept them from telling us that we were kids and we should go home.

The first time my younger sister, eleven years old, saw people having sex in front of her, it was my older sister and a stranger wearing nothing but a green condom—in the middle of a living room at a house party. The first time I saw people in real life copulating, however drunkenly, was in a hotel room surrounded by my sister's friends when we marched from the bathroom, refusing to be exiled to the cold tile any longer, hoping our obvious animosity toward their actions would result in at least a temporary cessation of their joyless coupling.

At twelve years old, my Halloween costume was “Jail Bait.” I wore a tiny floral cocktail dress that showed off my frantically budding body and a sign on

my back that said, “Twelve Years Old—Seriously, You’re a Pervert.”

I never saw my older sister’s shame for her body, which I know now existed. She struggled with anorexia and addiction, with all manner of adolescent psychoses that I couldn’t have understood at the time. I did see my younger sister’s revulsion; her fear at her own body’s attempt to achieve womanhood; her loathing of sex; her fear of intimacy. She did everything in her power to remove the signs of sexual maturity from her body—shaved head, androgynous clothing, makeup straight from a Kiss mic check.

But I did not feel any of those things.

I loved my body.

I loved the way it felt to swing my hips in undulating circles, round and round in its halo of skirts, gyrating to jam bands on sunny lawns, bare feet shuffling against the earth. I loved the way my breasts sat high on my chest, full and round and already large enough to send me searching for Frederick’s catalogs rather than my local department stores.

But I knew my body was somehow *wrong*. At five-foot-three I would only ever see another inch of height, and I knew I would be lucky for that. With my widening hips and my ballooning chest, I knew I would never look like the girls in the magazines. With my thick Jewish curls and dense body hair, I knew I would never achieve the cool clean effortlessness of girls on beaches in bikinis without a pubic hair in sight. I knew I would have to fight my body someday. But then, I loved it for what it was.

I taped pictures onto my closet wall, pictures of magazine models in whom I saw something of myself. In the eyes, in the chest, in the freedom of their movement or the slant of their smiles. My whole closet became a shrine of female beauty, and in the middle stood my full-length mirror.

One day, my father looked into my closet. “Doesn’t that make you feel bad about yourself?” he asked, as though I was objectively less than the willowy models draped across the drywall.

And suddenly, it did.

Suddenly I noticed the way men looked at me when they heard my name. “Oh, I know your sister,” they’d say. And I heard its menace.

I hid behind my younger sister and her fury, her shapeless clothes and her shorn head. She knew how to reject this attention in the way our older sister had known to invite it.

I looked for balance and found confusion.

My belly was too round; my hands too small; my eyes too narrow; my teeth too yellow; my shoulders too broad. Now my body was my adversary. But more than that, it was *mine*, and it needed my constant defense. Defense against my own accusations, against a constant onslaught of ads that pointed out its flaws, against the men who looked at it as though they already knew it better than I did myself.

I did not hate it, but it confounded me. How could it be wrong? How could these hips that sway so pleasantly be too wide? How could the curve underneath my belly, rounding happily around my navel...how could this be ugly? This lump of cellulite

that is my thigh, which shivers when I quietly caress it...how can it be unlovable? How could all of these parts of me, these shapes and sensations and possibilities, betray me?

At twelve years old I found joy in my burgeoning body. At fourteen I was learning to own it, to navigate my fear of and love for it. While wearing the same long skirts and burgundy lipstick I had made my second skin for what felt like a lifetime, my body was taken from me.

A boy from school, my sister's age, raped me in a closet at a New Year's Eve party. I sat in the cold outside my house, chain smoking my younger sister's Marlboro Reds and trying to wrap my head around who I was now. *What* I was. What was this thing that encompassed me, that was mine and now suddenly not mine, that was not *me* but in some way defined me? What would this thing be to me now?

What good is it to love or hate yourself, anyway?

What good is any kind of attachment to this body?

In the early days of the new year, I tried to end my connection with this thing, this suffering, sorrowful thing, this bulky collection of curves and corners I had barely learned to admire and fear. I wondered how after all I might do, it would be the only thing left of me. The only part tied to the world when the *real* me, the rest of me, had vacated forever.

I survived, barely, and in my weeks of convalescence I did not touch my body. Not to shower, not to eat, not to dress in pretty clothes. My body had betrayed me by living and I no longer knew where it

began and I ended, or if I could ever extricate myself from my flesh—MY flesh. Not my *self*.

But the body *wants* to heal. And as I learned, I am my body. I am the rapid fire synapses of memory and experience and alchemical personality that is my brain that is my body. There is no separation. I am who I am, and my body is a part of that. Only a part. Not apart.

When I was fifteen, learning to love myself again, learning to move inside this thing, this painful thing that stuttered and stalled, I decided to own myself again. I bought my first vibrator and spent the next three years privately teaching myself the art of self pleasure, the joy of my hips and my breasts and my belly and neck, the aspects of this whole that is me as much as I am it.

I learned to love myself, all my broken and beautiful bits. I never danced as well as I once had—effortlessly loving the feel of my body as it rocked itself to a jungle beat or skipped to the twang of a mandolin without discrimination. Improvising, though, gave me a comfortable familiarity with myself and my body.

At eighteen, I might not have loved myself with the naïve happiness of my pubescent awakening. I sighed in frustration when yet another bra failed to contain my ample chest. I groaned in disappointment when another new fashion squeezed my fleshy hips into improbable shapes.

Not because of me, though. Never because of me. Never the fault of this body, this shape, these rounds and ripples and ridges.

At eighteen I felt secure enough in my body to begin to invite others in. Cautiously, selectively, safely.

I did not hesitate to introduce myself. To say, “This is where I like to be touched, this is where I like to be squeezed, this is where I like to be kissed, this is where I like to feel the heat of breath against my skin.”

Life has ravaged me, but this body is who I am. I have built lives inside a torso that has stretched and shriveled and gained and lost and gained and lost again. I have learned to love more of me. My new softnesses. My new urgencies. My new likes and dislikes. My new loathings and yearnings. Myself.

For twenty years I have engaged in this process. This becoming and exploration, this cycle of endless newness. Just as minds continue to grow and change, as who we are develops from one thing to another, so do our bodies, and so does our need to find and know them. I am not the girl I was at twelve, despite my one inch of growth and sixty-pound gain. I am not the girl I was at fifteen, despite my damage and my self-destruction. I am not the girl I was at twenty, the woman I was at twenty-five. I am new again, always new again, discovering how I fit into the world.

I am my physical self, not something imprisoned within. It is something I try to teach my three daughters, three sisters who will also grow to womanhood through journeys defined as witnesses of one another's experience.

My sisters fight their own battles with their bodies. Wars of eating disorders and surgeries, of medical dramas and reconstructions. Their fights are not the same, and not the same as mine. But we have reached our adulthoods with some sense of self-love, all three of us. With some sense of self-respect and

shamelessness. I know my way is not the only way. I know Fulfilled Womanhood is a destination arrived at by many different paths.

I have earned my growth and my scars. I have earned my right to enjoy and to wallow.

I have earned the right to occupy my space and myself.

I am here, myself, in myself, of myself. As every human is, does, and should.

And now, I leave to find myself again.

Lea Grover is a writer and speaker living on Chicago's south side. Her writing has been featured in numerous anthologies, including *Listen To Your Mother: What She Said Then, What We're Saying Now*, and on websites ranging from *Cosmopolitan* to AlterNet to *The Daily Mail Online*, and she speaks about sex positivity in parenting and on behalf of the RAINN Speakers Bureau. She can be found on her blog (Becoming SuperMommy: <http://chicagonow.com/becoming-supermommy>), on Twitter (@bcmgsupermommy) and Facebook, or preparing her upcoming memoir.



“My sexuality lives permanently within me, not
my bra.” – Elle the Author



Thoughts from The Wrong Side of Breast Cancer

by Elle the Author

They're just tits. Granted, yours are fabulous, but they're still just tits.

No matter how many times others or even I convey this to me, I refuse to believe it. I love the way my tits feel when I glide my fingers over them, the way my boyfriend's fingers do it much better. I relish the feel of hot breath on my nipples that causes tingles down to my toes. I adore the bottom curve of a supple tit when it is hanging free and I am carnally drawn to the very unnatural curve caused by the push-up bra. My tits are the tits, as they say. And now they are taking them away from me.

More specifically, cancer is taking them away from me. Thirty-five-year-old, supple-titted me is going under the knife tomorrow morning. While cancer itself has been a difficult journey with many twists and turns, the double mastectomy has been the largest mental hurdle for me to clear. Obviously, as I haven't cleared it yet.

I suppose one could say that I am lucky because I have an incredibly attractive boyfriend who considers himself an "ass man" and who seems unconcerned about the cosmetic outcome of my surgery, other than begging me to not go too big. Let me be clear: I don't as of now have much of an ass. I did as a runner for many years, but this past year of relocation, falling in love and this deadly disease has left my ass rather flat.

But the point is, I have a boyfriend who would find me sexy with or without the tits I have now, and who continues to remind me that my life will not end on the surgery table, but rather it is going to be saved. Yes, he's a keeper.

But here's the thing. My sexuality and my tits are so intertwined that I am incredulous as to how one can continue effectively on without the other. I have always understood these tits I have to be the sexual nuclei, the oral starting positions, the hot buttons that signal great foreplay is at hand. After the mastectomy, I may or may not regain sensation in the nipple, the delicious sensation that makes my toes tingle. With all due respect, medical science, fuck you.

Medical science saving my life tomorrow morning can make me recant that statement. I will live, and I will be even bustier eventually, when I am not here on the wrong side of cancer. When I am through all of my treatment and my post-op appointments and self-pity, I will be on the right side of cancer. The thankful side of cancer. The "I'm alive and I am woman and hear me roar!" side of cancer. Maybe.

Why maybe? I have the type of cancer that is very receptive to estrogen—ER positive breast cancer. This means that anti-hormone treatment should be effective if I take my little pills for at least two years, maybe ten. We don't know yet. All I do know is that at thirty-five years old, medical science is going to induce menopause that may or may not be permanent. Guaranteed vaginal dryness. Frequent hot flashes. Quite possibly a murdered libido. You know what,

medical science? I'm back to screaming a big "fuck you" from the rooftop.

Cancer and sexuality, in my short experience thus far, are inseparable; one has to affect the other. Once my tits are gone and my hormone faucet has stopped dripping entirely, will I get to be a woman again? At what point will all the positivity in the world not be enough to go up against a medical science that says, "Your sexuality is collateral damage, now get out of my way?" When will my keeper-boyfriend decide he wants a twenty-something natural-breasted girl with a naturally wet pussy and normal hormone levels?

I know I am not the only woman who has these thoughts, but I'll be damned if I look around me and see no woman asking these questions or providing some answers.

I'm angry. I'm damn pissed off, actually. I'm also ashamed, because I know that I get to live and I gain a fresh set of tits of my choosing, and yet I am plagued with these thoughts the night before going under the knife.

However, this diatribe is not to simply complain without resolution. I am smiling as I write this because I realize that by broaching this topic, I might already be halfway there. Hell, I had intended to plug my book, *The Fall: An Autobiography of an Alter Ego* (there, I plugged it, anyway!), but when I sat down these thoughts about sex and cancer materialized. I care about my sexuality, and I will not allow it to be collateral damage. I will not lose it to cancer.

No woman wants to hear that she has breast cancer, and too many do. Through all of my fears, a

few kernels of truth have kept me going. If you have cancer and you are a sexually active, healthy woman like me, maybe they'll help you, too.

1. Sexuality 90 percent mental. If you feel sexy and you own your sexiness—well, they make creams to help pretty much everything else.

2. If you are in love, be sure that you are in love with a keeper who loves you for many reasons beyond your physicality.

3. Share frustrations with someone you trust. Verbalizing your fears to someone who can act as a voice of reason quite often diffuses the fear.

4. Tits and hormones don't make a woman. You are every bit the woman you were before cancer, and you will be a better and stronger version of your womanly self on the right side of cancer—and nothing is sexier than strength.

5. Love the marks on your body that illustrate something trying to defeat you, but losing. Remember that scars tell stories.

6. Stay open to the idea that a deeper or greater form of sexuality is awaiting you—increased sensation elsewhere, carrying yourself in a different manner (but still with head held high, of course), the opportunity to wear a new skin that you just might one day like better, because of what I mentioned in number five.

7. They're just tits. It really is true, and I was wrong. My sexuality lives permanently within me, not my bra. Tits are fun as hell, but if they're trying to kill you, let them go. Your sexuality will still be there when you wake up. I promise.

Truth, love and cheers to all the tits, old and new. Mine look fabulous tonight and I've decided they'll look even more fabulous tomorrow in the pathology lab. They'll serve as evidence of the treatment that will allow me to enjoy life with a new set of tits—one with a warranty.

Elle is an author, public speaker, and survivor of dating abuse, an experience that led her to pen her first novel, *The Fall: An Autobiography of an Alter Ego*. A 2001 Clemson University graduate and 2010 MBA graduate of UCLA Anderson, Elle relocated from Santa Monica to Lake Norman in Charlotte, North Carolina in 2014 and now lives on the water with her boyfriend and her beautiful husky. She has begun working on her second novel, *The Rise*. For more about Elle, check out her website at elletheauthor.com.



“Through burlesque, I embraced my body as powerful, beautiful and capable.” —Nicole LaBonde



Divorce and Burlesque

by Nicole LaBonde

I grew up in a very rural town in Western Pennsylvania, in a very conservative Christian family. Considering those two factors, it is not at all surprising how disconnected I was to my body. It's astonishing I got into dance at all.

I started ballet relatively late, at age twelve. If I'd hoped for a professional ballet career, I should already have been at a company school, been taking summer intensives in New York City or have at least five *Nutcrackers* under my belt (tights?). Not just starting. But I was. I *loved* ballet. I was far behind the other girls my age. I worked hard. But nothing was going to make up for those five to nine years of missed dance classes. So instead of aiming to be the best, I strove to be the thinnest.

By the time I turned sixteen, my eating was disordered. No one really recognized it, because I had always been thin. I still ate at home, mostly restricting it at school. There, I'd eat six crackers. For each one I had to take six bites—a compulsion, and not a healthy pattern by any stretch. I kept that up all through high school, while continuing my dancing.

In college, I minored in dance. It was a way to dance without having to audition for the program. Because I was certain I was not good enough to get into any program for which I had to audition. There was still so much I didn't know. I still felt so behind my peers.

When I got to dance school, I learned it was a modern school, more than just a ballet school. In modern, I discovered ways that I could freely move, where I excelled. I didn't *have* to be like anyone else. And for most kids coming out of studios, true modern dance was an unknown. So all of those talented ballerinas learned right alongside me.

Still, I wasn't the *best* dancer. So I kept with my mode of being the thinnest. As I danced more than ever, I ate less than ever. In addition, I was obsessed with NOT gaining the "freshman fifteen." So I restricted my eating even more consciously, at every meal. I experimented with vegetarianism. I claimed moral reasons, but it was really about eating less out of fear of losing my thin identity. I felt that nothing else was mine. That's really what it was about for me, being unique. So my disordered eating became a full-blown problem.

Somehow, I made it through my freshman year. Three weeks after returning home for the summer, I crashed. While preparing to go to my summer job, my body just collapsed. I urinated and defecated blood. I passed out.

In the hospital they treated me for extreme dehydration. All I'd been doing was drinking water, but without proper nourishment, it wasn't enough. My body had nothing left to run on, so it gave up. I spent a few days in the hospital, then was discharged to therapy to address my "disordered eating." My body had not lost enough weight for me to be considered as having an eating disorder (likely because I was so

slight already), but there was clearly a problem that needed to be addressed.

I spent the next year and a half in therapy, discussing my childhood, my relationship with food, the dance world and its body obsession. As I mentioned, my upbringing was very religious and conservative. In that experience, the body is considered evil or, at best, inconvenient. Dance is dangerous, as you are asking people to look at your body (for shame!). And then, all sorts of sin can occur. Somehow, *our* bodies suddenly became responsible for *other people's* behaviors. As a result, serious tension stood between what I had chosen to do with my life and what I was told “good girls” did. I walked a fine line. Much of my time in therapy was spent trying to reconcile those two things, to believe that I could be a “good girl” and a dancer.

What we never talked about, and what I've come to see as true, is that my eating disorder wasn't a cry for help. It wasn't even a desire for control. (Most are characterized as one of these two things.) My eating disorder was a cry to be seen, to be known, to have something of my own. No amount of focus on the external factors was going to take away *those* desires, to truly find—and be known as—myself.

While I had outwardly let go of many of the physical manifestations of an eating disorder, the underlying cause, a longing for self, had not yet been solved. Two things helped me answer that deep call, and create a good relationship with my body: Pilates and burlesque.



My body and I started to come to terms with each other after college, when I found Pilates. Through the work, I realized that my body needed to be fueled well in order to perform well, especially if I wanted to increase my strength and ability. Thin was not the goal anymore; *fit* was.

Fitness taught me the importance of good, healthy food. I learned that I could push my body without harming it. I became excited about what my body could do, rather than staying hung up on my perceived deficiencies. This was a transformational shift in my thinking and approach. In my quest, my body was my partner, rather than a competitor.

Most importantly, in Pilates I realized the pure potential of the body. There is SO MUCH we are capable of, with any background, any ability. I began to see my body as potential, rather than limits. I saw beauty. As a result, I became stronger and more flexible in my late twenties than I had been during my time dancing (and restricting) in college.

During this time, I got married. My upbringing taught me that premarital sex was a definite “no,” and saving yourself until marriage the only option. Which I did. However, no one ever had a conversation with me about sex. I’m not talking the birds and the bees of it. I’m talking about intimacy with another person. And intimacy with your own body.

Learning that the body and sex are evil, paired with the disconnect between myself and my body during my eating disorder, I was out of touch sexually. I had an incredibly difficult time with sex with my husband; it felt like work for me. I had intense anxiety and worry around sex: *Was it enough? Was I enough? Why didn't I like it more? What was wrong with me?* I would rather do anything else. But I felt like it was my duty.

Here's what I learned. You shouldn't have to try to like sex, especially with a person you love. It should happen easily. Freely. But for us, mainly for me, it wasn't.

My husband accused me of being frigid. Uninterested in sex. Selfish. Career-centered. He wasn't altogether wrong. I had found work I loved in dance, theater and Pilates, and had thrown myself into it full force. At least there, I knew who I was. I knew what I was doing. It excited me. It gave me a fulfillment and a rush that I never found in sex. I believed him anyway, because I didn't know better.

Unsurprisingly, he found sexual fulfillment elsewhere and we eventually divorced. Another definite "no" from my upbringing, but there I was.

There is something deeply painful about words regarding your own essence being undesirable (his comments about me being "frigid" and "uninterested in sex"), leveled at you from the person who knew you best. Who knew you at your most vulnerable. His words lasted in my mind. For about a year I was divorced, not just from him, but from myself.

After the divorce, I sought a way to reclaim my body, femininity and sexuality. My body once again became my enemy. It had betrayed me. It wasn't capable of being a woman. I longed to be normal, to enjoy intimacy. I wanted that connection with someone. I didn't understand it. My femininity, while it existed in my dress and personality, didn't exist in my soul. As someone who advocated the mind/body connection, I had none of my own.

My sensuality was nowhere to be found. I felt unfeminine, partly because of my work. I was running my own business and I typically didn't react the way men expected. I acted business-like, which is usually considered masculine by society's standards. And because of my conservative upbringing and ideals, my husband was only my second relationship ever. I didn't date casually.

My first attempts at dating quickly showed the dichotomy between who I desired to be: a woman capable of expressing herself in words and action, capable of taking care of herself and expressing love, and how I acted, like a frightened, disconnected girl. Every date or brief relationship seemed to prove my ex right.

While fitness and Pilates had taught me to treat my body well, I never learned its connection to my true self until I rediscovered burlesque.

I had first experienced burlesque years ago in Philadelphia, where I worked as a dance and performance artist and choreographer and actor for musical theater. Many pieces crossed genres into burlesque—a style of dance typified by a striptease.

There are many genres—classic, neo, nerdlesque, boylesque, etc. At its heart, burlesque makes fun of our obsession with, and our taboos about, sex. Burlesque felt fun, sexy and suited to me. I loved being able to create a character, which brought a beautiful fusion of my dance and theater work. I had never pursued burlesque, of course. “Good girls” didn’t do that sort of thing.

When I choreographed *Gypsy* in 2013, I grew passionate about the art of burlesque. I began to explore it, research it and create my own character and dances. I loved the idea of the “tease” because it gave me the power to share myself (including my body) with others, or to choose not to. That is really what makes burlesque.

Burlesque isn’t merely stripping to music. It’s a feminist act—a woman in control of her body and surroundings. As Eliza DeLite, British burlesque dancer said, “Taking clothes off is not really a huge deal—for me, the emphasis is on creating something interesting for the audience.” I totally got that. It was why I loved theater and dance. Yes, the applause was great. But more importantly, I was creating something with the audience that could never be experienced again. No show or audience is ever the same. We connect and tell stories.

Live art is a series of intimate moments shared with strangers. I loved and craved that more than the attention—to be known on my own terms. That’s what the eating disorder was about, after all. And that’s really what my intimacy issues had been about as well.

I felt unable to connect to myself, and therefore anyone else. Burlesque helped me discover myself.

I wasn't frigid. My sensuality existed after all! An entire layer of myself had been awaiting expression. It wasn't that I didn't have sensuality. It was that I hadn't known how to connect to it and convey it before. While this was not behavior I had been brought up to consider appropriate, nothing else resonated. I knew, despite what other people would say or think, that burlesque was right for me. I had found a place for my whole self.

As CoCo Le Bod (CoCo, The Body, get it?), I felt fun and flirty. Powerful. Dancing, my body became my tool. I could decide what to create, express and show. I was more in charge of myself, body and soul, than I had ever been. I thrived on subtlety and tease. On vintage. On quirky, over-the-top character work. On class and elegance, with smoldering undercurrents. I had something entirely my own. And what made it fun was that I got to share it with people!

Burlesque showed me that I was more of a woman than I'd thought I was. Through burlesque, I embraced my body as powerful, beautiful and capable. Only I could do these acts. More importantly, I could only do them when I felt truly connected—body and soul. When I learned to appreciate and love my body, when I let my soul travel through my body, I found the person I always was and wanted to be, right there waiting for me.

Nicole LaBonde (a.k.a. CoCo Le Bod) is a Health and Wellness entrepreneur who has created a business from her experience as a professional in the fields of fitness, dance and theater, and nutrition. She is the creatrix of CABARRET barre and burlesque fitness classes, as well as Showgirl Shape classes. She is also a professional burlesque dancer and a founding member of Divas and Dolls Burlesque. Nicole has been featured in *SHAPE* magazine, *Business Heroine*, *Philadelphia* magazine's BeWell Blog, multiple media outlets on healing and transformation, and several eBooks on fitness. Nicole holds a BA in Dance from Eastern University and is a certified Pilates instructor through the prestigious Romana's Pilates organization. CabarretFit.com



“By sharing our stories, we remove the burden of shame because we did nothing wrong.” – Rachel Thompson



SEXUAL ASSAULT

Mind if I admit something? When I began seeking stories for this book, I thought I actually had to specify that sexual violence was one of the topics I hoped to include—to make sure that at least someone addressed it. As soon as people began responding to my query, I realized that there was never a need for any such mention. Many of the most sexually empowered women I know found their way to such strength after being brutalized and violated in the worst, nearly unimaginable ways.

Every 107 seconds, someone in the United States is sexually assaulted, according to the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network. Nearly 70 percent go unreported for a broad range of reasons—shame and fear one won't be believed being two of the biggies. Nearly one in five women and one in seventy-one men report being raped at some point in their lives. I don't know anyone who isn't somehow affected by sexual violence, nor, I suspect, do you. The brutal epidemic affects *all* of us, some more directly than others.

We Did Nothing Wrong

by Rachel Thompson

She grew up ashamed, carrying the weight of something no little girl should have to: childhood sexual abuse at the age of eleven. She testified at two trials, civil and military, her abuser an adult male, a father of five, an army officer.

He got two years.

Her parents told her she was fine, that what happened to her wasn't as bad as what happened to other, younger girls. That it could have been much, much worse.

She didn't know what to do with those memories that cut into her skin, the devastating flashbacks that hit her with such force she would curl into the tiniest little ball alone at night when she couldn't get the image of the huge man touching her in places she herself had never touched out of her head, of the words he spoke in a deep, guttural voice when he forced her to touch him in hard places she didn't know existed on a man, to fly away into the night, so she'd never have to hear them again.

She lay like a soldier in her bed, counting the imaginary nighttime footsteps from their house to her small room, walls covered with the pretty pastel rainbow wallpaper her mom let her pick out. One, two, five, ten. She checks her window repeatedly, making sure it's locked, that the wooden dowel her father made is locked in place, before she can fall into a churning, nightmarish sleep. For eight years.

Her children wonder why she jumps at the smallest sound.

She doesn't tell anyone what happened because the shame is so great; not even her long-term boyfriend knows. It isn't until she is engaged to a new man in her late twenties that she comes clean—during a boring movie, of all things. His reaction is mellow: he's sorry. She falls asleep.

She marries for love, has two children, works hard, makes a life, yet is unprepared for the emotional impact having babies will have on her mental health—because she must work, leaving them alone with a sitter is more than she can bear. Spiraling into a deep depression, suffering panic attacks and anxiety at the thought of a stranger hurting her vulnerable little souls, the gray closes in.

Thankfully, she knows enough to ask for help. Thirty years after her abuse, she enters therapy and starts medication, calming her enough to push away the gray, if not the dissociation that still plagues her.

Here's what's interesting about being a wife, mother, sister, daughter, friend, businessperson, and now ex-wife, who has survived sexual abuse: nobody treats you differently, which is great! You are expected to function just like everyone else, so...you do. Until, you don't. You can only ignore what happened for so long, until it comes screaming back and says, "Bitch! Look at me. Deal with me. I'm not going anywhere and I'm going to wreak havoc on your life until you do." And it's not kidding.

She ultimately started writing about her experience in journals nobody would see. Poetry

mostly, but also essays because the memories were still so strong, she had to get it out of her head, as well as mining the caves hidden deep inside her core. Survivors carry shame around, and they ultimately have to decide to make friends or continue to fight.

She realized shame has a voice, too.

She published two books of poetry and prose that won awards and became bestsellers. A publisher signed her, as well as offered her the opportunity for her own imprint, working with other survivors to bring their stories of trauma and recovery to life. More importantly, however, she connected with hundreds of other survivors, forming a vocal community to help others share their stories.

For many years she rejected the term “recovery,” because that seemed to apply more to addicts (in her mind). It wasn’t until she became more active in the survivor community that she realized much of what she suffered growing up was a direct result of the abuse: flashbacks, nightmares she still has to this day (and she’s fifty-one now), triggers, hyper-vigilance, panic, the above-mentioned dissociation, and even migraine headaches. Studies show that the brains of childhood sexual abuse survivors are forever altered, making them more prone to physical and mental disorders later in life.

To say she’s not in recovery would be foolish. She accepts it and is working hard to heal.

By sharing our stories, we remove the burden of shame because *we did nothing wrong*. If nothing else, that’s the message she wants people (survivors and non-survivors alike) to know and take into their soul.

We is she. She is me.

I did nothing wrong. I am not a victim. I am a survivor.

**Rachel wrote in third person to show the disassociation that is common among abuse survivors.*

Rachel Thompson is the author of *Broken Places* (2015 Honorable Mention Winner, San Francisco Book Festival), and the multi award-winning *Broken Pieces*, as well as two humor books, *A Walk in the Snark* and *Mancode: Exposed*. Rachel is published and represented by Booktrope. As owner of BadRedHead Media, she creates effective social media and book marketing campaigns for authors. Rachel is the creator and founder of the hashtag phenomenon #MondayBlogs and the live Twitter chat, #SexAbuseChat, co-hosted with certified therapist/survivor, Bobbi Parish. She's also the director of the Gravity Imprint for Booktrope, bringing stories of trauma and recovery to life. She hates walks in the rain, running out of coffee and coconut, and lives in California with her family.
www.rachelintheoc.com



“No one taught me about my body on purpose.” —
Butterfly Jones



How Butterfly Found Her Wings

by August, based on an interview with Butterfly Jones

Butterfly Jones stands six feet tall without her stiletto boots. Her wavy hair matches the curves of her hourglass figure, and “cherry blossom pink” glimmers on her perfectly pouty lips. “People look at me and think I have it all together,” she said with a laugh. “If only they knew—not an easy life for me.”

The forty-six-year-old Minneapolis native donned her name long before she evolved out of her metaphorical cocoon. “They called me Butterfly cuz of the way I looked when I played volleyball,” she said, recalling junior. “Wings all flappin,’ hair flying... I loved those games, and I was good.’ But then everything stopped.”

During the eighth grade, life volleyed Butterfly a scenario no one should have to face. During a slumber party, her best friend’s father molested her on her pink and purple sleeping bag. “He took us out for ice cream before and kept looking at me like I was the real treat,” she said. “There I was thinking how cute I must’ve been, and how lucky—getting his attention...a few hours later when Chelsea was in the shower, I was screaming on the family room floor. He covered my mouth, had his way with me then just left me there, cryin.’ Said if I told anyone, he’d kill my mama and little brother.”

She didn’t even know what sex was then, other than a way for “mamas to make babies.” The last thing

he said before raping her was ‘You’re so beautiful.’ “Even though I was scared, that meant something,” she said. “Felt like I was special.”

Fearful of the man’s threats and what others might think, she kept the occurrence secret for decades. “I was never good at school, especially after that,” she said. “My boobs grew faster than the other girls. ‘Where your brain? In your bra?’ kids used to say—always teasing me. In high school I learned that guys liked it when I wore tight clothes and batted my eyes. I was getting attention...figured it was the one thing I was good at.”

“A teacher told me I was good in music. I always loved singing...and dancing, but I was shy about it. If I’d listened to her, maybe I’d be someone else now... Who am I now? That’s a good question.”

Butterfly dropped out of high school in the eleventh grade, a decision her single mother barely flinched at. “She cared about us, sure, but she was busy working three jobs,” she explained. “I told her I quit school so I could dance, but I really just wanted to make money so she could sleep sometime, and spend more time with my brother.”

While walking home from a neighborhood market one night, toting a bag of canned and frozen food for her and her brother, she passed a nightclub. Smoke poured from the entry, she recalled, and the music was so loud, the sidewalk trembled.

“A couple of guys hooted and hollered at me,” she said. “One came up to me and said I should be on stage. He stunk of booze and cigarettes. I was gonna walk away, but he handed me a wad of cash—just

dropped it in my bag and then drug me [into the club] by the arm.”

“I didn’t dance that night, but I saw the other girls. They weren’t just dancing... They took off their clothes, swung around poles—rode them while guys in the audience drooled and nearly pissed themselves. They looked powerful. And I thought, I want to feel that.”

Butterfly began stopping by the club nightly until she worked up the courage to talk to one of the performers. It’s a “shit life,” she was told, but she could make a hell of a lot of money.

Stashing the “shit life” remark away, Butterfly focused on what she deemed a lucrative career opportunity. She could help pay for rent and groceries. Unlike her, her brother could have their mother present throughout the rest of his youth. He might even go to college.

“He was always smart,” she said. “And he didn’t have boobs and an ass to lean on, if you follow. He deserved a better life. He could really do something with himself.”

Butterfly compares her introduction to stripping to driving for the first time. “You’re terrified, but you want [to do] it so badly,” she said. “And then suddenly it gets easy, like you knew how to do it all along. Just have to be on the lookout for crazy drivers.”

For a while, it seemed that her dreams were coming true.

“It *was* powerful for a while,” she said. “I was on top of the world and no one could touch me. On good nights I made over a thousand bucks cash.”

One night after one of her biggest paying performances, she learned that she was touchable—and worse. A man from the audience slipped out the door behind her and followed her home.

“I felt him walking up behind me, sent the hairs on my neck on end,” she said. “When I turned around, I knew. It was the guy whose eyes were creeping me out all night. I shoulda asked for someone to walk me home, but I didn’t.”

At nineteen-years-old (and having lied about her age to the club manager, claiming she was twenty-one) she was raped for the second time, in a dark alley, pressed up against a garbage bin that reeked of rot and fast food. “It was my second time having sex, if you wanna call it that,” she said wistfully. “This time, I just felt numb... I just wanted it to be over so I could go home.”

She continued to strip for several more years, eventually taking up modeling on the side. Modeling was different, she said—like working in an office versus a crowded alley. The clients were professional. They treated her well and made her feel more like a skilled adult than a sexual “play thing.”

When her modeling agent learned of her primary vocation, he encouraged her to quit. “‘You’re better than that,’ he told me, but I didn’t know how to believe him. Besides, I wasn’t making close [to] as much money modeling. Mama had bills to pay!”

Struck by his words, she cut back somewhat on her stripping hours then compensated financially by offering a few “special treatments” at the club. “Some of the guys would pay triple or more for a blowjob,”

she said. “When one of the regulars who I kind of liked—more polite than the others—asked for more, I gave it to him and ended up pregnant.”

Pregnancy was the first time Butterfly felt a connectedness to her body. Where she’d previously seen over-sized breasts and something to be taken, profited from and enjoyed by others, she saw beauty, capability and life. “I wanted to take care of myself for once,” she said. “I wanted to care of my baby.”

Lost for a viable way to support her growing family, she went back to stripping after giving birth to her son, Jeremiah. “Whenever I hated going on stage, which was most of the time, I thought ‘I’ll do this for him.’ And then I did.”

She was twenty-four when she met a young man at a local playground. “He was babysitting his niece and nephew, and I sat there watching him while I pushed Jeremiah in the swing,” she said. “He looked like he really loved them, and it almost made me cry. So gentle, so sweet.”

She saw the man, Samuel—a sociology student at the University of Minnesota, repeatedly at the park. Over time they became friends. Then one day while helping their little ones along the monkey bars, he asked her out on her first-ever date. “Part of me was expecting him to hand me cash and pull down his pants, but I knew he wasn’t like that,” she recalled. “We went on a picnic and for a walk around Lake Harriet—made me feel like a princess.”

Soon, Butterfly opened up to Samuel about stripping, her lack of experience with dating, romance and sexual intimacy (she had no idea what ‘sexual

intimacy' entailed until he explained) and being raped. "I thought he'd think I'm disgusting and run away," she said through tears. "He just said 'I love you, baby' then held me so tight."

She quit stripping shortly thereafter and began seeing a therapist at Samuel's insistence. Two years later, the couple wed. She's since put her brother through nursing school, given birth to two healthy girls and obtained her GED.

If Butterfly could go back and change anything about her life, she'd have given her mother, who died of liver disease after her first daughter was born, a supportive partner. "If she'd had help, she woulda loved us better," she said. "We all need someone to take care of us and teach us things...like what it means to be a woman, and to love another person and be loved."

"No one taught me about my body on purpose. I learned about sex from being raped...and what I'm worth from stripping on stage. Sounds like crazy talk now! I was twenty-four [the] first time I made love... It's still a struggle sometimes. I have to remind myself that sex isn't something men take—not the good ones. Not my Samuel."

"I couldn't believe that sex was fun and felt good!" she said of her early sexually intimate experiences. "People think strippers know all about sex, and maybe they do, but not the best kind, not about making love. Almost every girl I danced with was raped, at *least* once. We were all just a bunch of kids up there, feeling lost. Makes me sad. I feel sorry for the men [watching], too. Who taught them to be like that?"

If schools and parents don't teach us nothing about our bodies and our worth, she poignantly added, the world will. "I won't let my girls or my boy have that—not my babies," she said. "They are worth something. We all are."



“Conditional love isn’t love. It’s false hope to hook you into staying and feeding someone else’s power mania.” – M



A PARTNER'S SEX ADDICTION

Beautiful is the woman who shares her difficult-to-tell story purely for the sake of others. M. chose to anonymously share her experience learning of her husband's dangerous, deceptive sexual behaviors in hopes of shedding light for even one person who feels desperate and alone in the dark place in which she once found herself.

Her story brings one of my favorite quotes (often attributed to Plato) to mind: *Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.* While secrecy seems pronounced around sexual matters as a whole, addiction brings shame and hiding to a whole new level—especially in a world that suggests your partner's behaviors should be written off as a simple case of “boys will be boys.” Newsflash: It's not natural or healthy for anyone, regardless of gender, to engage in deceptive, hurtful, compulsive sexual behaviors that make life virtually unlivable. (If you or a loved one is doing so, please seek help.)

Embraceable

Imagine realizing rather suddenly that the person you'd married wasn't who you had perceived them to be at all—that someone seemingly loyal and loving, was actually a raging sex addict who'd put both of your lives in danger many times over your paired years. Now imagine moving past all of that and going on to thrive. Meet M, a woman who's living it.

Waking Up with a Stranger: My Sex-Addicted Spouse and the Morning(s) After

by M

Five years ago, my then-husband D came out to me as a sex addict. I didn't know what that meant or how quickly it was going to eradicate the cornerstones of my life. I doubt I'm the only person who's had to face this blind, and I'm sharing my story to give a loving hand to anyone who might feel, as I did for a while, that the world no longer makes sense. If you relate to my story, I know that you too have the power to find yourself in charge of your own peace of mind someday soon. I hope this helps. More than anything, I send you love. I happen to know how much you've been starved of it. And better yet, how much more awaits you.

I also know that one thing you likely wonder is, "Oh my God, what did I do to get here?" This is NOT your fault. You are *not* the problem.

The day my world upended was my thirty-eighth birthday. I'd recently had surgery to remove the ovarian cysts that were making pregnancy impossible. The doctors joke that you should "go at it like rabbits" afterward, and I'd been trying to get laid for three months since. All I'd been getting was shut down. Even on D's birthday the previous month, he couldn't maintain an erection for the briefest of contact. On my own birthday I'd pulled out all the stops, wearing my most flattering outfit, playing his favorite music, fixing

his favorite drink. He pushed away the drink, shook his head and began weeping.

“I have something bad to tell you,” he said. But he couldn’t get any farther.

We’d been married for ten years, together for seventeen, and I knew his moods. He’d always been prone to depression, cycles of silence and no physical contact. The depressive spurts had been growing worse, and longer in duration. My role was to ask what was wrong and offer help, his role to stonewall. Whatever this breakdown was, he’d been building up his nerve to tell me.

I gave him space. We listened to more music. He went to the study alone for long passages, then returned. Over the next three days, in strangled half-sentences, he began confessing.

Had he been unfaithful? *Yes.* Had it been more than once? *Yes.* When? *I held out for a long time. I’d been fighting it. But finally when I got so stressed at work...* Do you mean last year when you changed jobs? *Yes.* Or the time period before that when you were so involved in the union fight with the city? *Well, yes. Then. It started then.* But you were really stressed before that while we were buying the house and you were working so much overtime... *Yes. I was. That’s when it really got bad.*

Gradually, it became apparent that he’d been going through cycles of sleeping with strangers, unprotected, for at least the last five years. He’d been struggling with the urge to do so for our entire marriage. This way of telling partial truths, then following them with bigger truths that contradicted

the previous story (e.g., “I’ve been cheating for one year. No, two years. No, five...”) is called staggered disclosure. I later learned that it’s common for sex addicts. The more truth they reveal, the more courage they gain to go deeper—because even in their most truthful moments they’ve held something back, fearing your reaction, but also desperate to hold on to their precious secrets. This is what’s so horrifying as a loving partner, in my opinion—to discover that not only has your beloved become someone you don’t recognize, but that they treasure the alter ego—the “Hyde” of their “Dr. Jekyll & Hyde” persona—as much as they hate it. Hyde makes them different, special, superior. But he also makes it impossible for the good doctor to look you in the eye.

My first reaction was to go into crazy information-gathering mode. D told me that he believed he was a sex addict, so I bought every book published on sex addiction. At the time, the only available books focused on the addiction itself, aimed at addicts. No printed resources existed for spouses or partners.

The books described behaviors that D and I recognized immediately. He was going through what’s known as the shame cycle—beginning with the desire to cross a personal morality line (putting up an ad for sex on Craigslist, for example) followed by overwhelming shame, which convinced him that he was no good. And if he was no good, he would inevitably do something horrible, and then worse and then worse. (One Craigslist ad leading to hours of cruising such ads, leading to answering one. Then ten.) This is the permission part of the cycle; by

denying his own goodness, he's given himself permission to act out and do what he's fated to do. So he sets up dates (in most cases, never less than two), has sex and then goes right back down the rabbit hole of shame. And so it goes.

What this looked like from my end: weeks-long stretches of cuddling and intimacy, followed by longer stretches of sullen silence, little physical contact and no sex, often while he opted to work lots of overtime. This common happening is called sexual anorexia—times when the person reacts to shameful behaviors by not having sex with anyone, trying to nip it in the bud, trying to prevent another act-out.

For D, unsurprisingly, cutting himself off from all intimacy only led to an overwhelming desire for it. He constantly obsessed over sex and forbidden sexual acts and eventually would give in to the compulsions. At this point, he would convince himself that he needed the sex because his needs were clearly different from those of others. It wouldn't hurt me, he assumed, because he was so good at lying that I'd never know. And besides, I'd never understand his special status. The books called this the Master of the Universe Syndrome: a progressively grander and more grandiose sense of self and entitlement.

The more partners D could manage, the more lines he could cross and the more exceptional puppet-master he became. Managing multiple affairs led to no sex with me, as he had to separate those acts mentally from me. Sex was only for manipulating others, to dominate, to humiliate and to deceive—the exact

opposite of loving intimacy. Sex addicts often have sex with everyone *except* their partner.

On the rare occasions we did have sex, he wouldn't look at me. If I laughed or smiled, he lost his erection and would storm off. It all had to be a scenario he had come up with ahead of time, and it had to be scheduled. I spent our first years trying to be everything he wanted, doing what he said turned him on. For instance, I spent six months losing forty-five pounds with Weight Watchers. I felt great about myself, highly sexual and wanted to share that with him. He, however, was in the middle of one his sexual anorexia periods. Not only did he not seem to notice the weight loss, but he shut me out of sex for four months. Later he would claim he desired me the most in this period, that we'd had sex *more* than—a lie he'd convinced himself of to justify cheating.

That was when I knew his cycles had nothing to do with me. I mistook it for depression, urged him to get help, which he opposed. Feeling starved of love at home, I found myself having wild crushes on other men. I didn't act on them, but apparently many partners of sex addicts get so desperate that they have affairs. I know that if anyone had touched me with desire in those last years, I would have been flooded with relief. D and I cuddled more and more, which he declared his preferred form of physical intimacy, over sex. He wanted to be near me, but not in me. Without realizing it, I was internalizing the belief that I was inherently undesirable. Sadly, this left me more vulnerable to predators who came along in D's wake.

I needed someone to talk to, but when I began to confide in my closest friends, I got baffled looks and questions about our diagnosis. This risky, sexually crazed person had no resemblance to the man they knew. He was a firefighter, a national hero. I was a writing teacher. We were pillars of the community, the most stable couple they knew, the people they came to for relationship advice or a helping hand. Believing that this level of deception might be going on threw their own judgment into question, not just mine; their own cozy worlds, not just ours.

I was fortunate enough to find a great therapist quickly—for me, not for the two of us. There had been only two warning signs in our ten shared years, and one of them had driven us to couples therapy by our first anniversary. I had accidentally come across an email to D discussing the hotel details of a rendezvous with a transgendered woman. He claimed it was just spam, but, sensing otherwise, I insisted on couples therapy or I'd leave. He agreed but never once changed his story. He admitted to looking at transgendered porn, but at the time he claimed it was only because I had already said I was threatened by "regular" porn. He was simply exploring something different and more exciting to look at. Clearly he'd used that process to not just hide, but to blame me for threatening our marriage vows. This time I told him to find his own shrink.

Almost at the moment my new therapist asked me what was going on, I began to cry. I think I cried the entire first session, barely able to speak. I realize now that my own house wasn't a safe place anymore, not

even to cry. Every photo, every knick-knack, reminded me that my life was a lie—that I'd been living in a fool's paradise, that everything I'd worked for my entire adult life had been exposed as useless and dirty. Had he started fucking around when we bought this silverware? When I bought him that CD? When we first got married?

This wasn't helped by continual new admissions. Just when I was starting to come to terms with the new narrative of my life, he'd zap me again:

“You remember the time I encouraged you to travel out of state for your friend's funeral because I was really loving and caring about you? Actually I had sex with five people that weekend, and that's why I wanted you out of the house.”

With support from my therapist, I realized that I could tell him to stop the stories, which he did. I didn't want to know. The more you know the partners of a sex addict, the more you dwell. When you're by yourself, you start to put the patterns together and discover more lies; you realize when he was acting out. It's gutting to realize that a time when you were truly caring for him or feeling particularly close, he was manipulating you and your blind trust.

I was fortunate that my therapist had experience working with trauma victims—which is precisely what I was. Traumatic experiences shake your security and strip you of your safety. Before my surgery I'd been tested for STDs and discovered I had one, luckily one easily cured with penicillin. D lied and said he must have long had it without transmitting it. American

men aren't routinely tested, he argued, so who knows how long it had been around?

After disclosure of his true behaviors, he admitted that he hadn't been using protection. He could have easily killed us both. Sex addicts believe bad things won't happen to them. They're Masters of the Universe after all. They choose to live in a fantasy world where reality isn't admitted. I asked him how as an educated paramedic he could not know that he risked exposing us to disease. He just shrugged. It was obvious: he could have given me, or God help us, an unborn child, HIV and it wouldn't have stopped him for a moment. My death or our child's death would not have been more important than Hyde's hard dick. Other people have their own reactions to this. Mine? Unforgiveable.

I confronted D about our future.

"The thing is," I said, "I never knew you were lying before. If we're going to go through your recovery together, I think it would be important for me to know when to suspect you are lying. I love you, but I clearly don't know you."

"You wouldn't know. You can't." He gave me a level stare. "You're too trusting."

Pow. Right in the kisser.

He couldn't tell me to get lost outright, but he could tell me he would hurt me again, and from then on, it would be my fault. I'd be "asking for it." He'd shown me his true colors and despite his seeking therapy as well, he knew he couldn't protect me from himself. Though I wanted badly to remain his support person through the process, I was his victim first. He'd stopped being my friend, much less my partner, when

he stopped caring if he killed me. I couldn't make him a different person. Love of someone else wouldn't stop this. Only love of self. He may've been incapable of that, but I wasn't. The most loving thing I could do was let him go. We began the divorce process.

In the end, it seems, he'd only told me the truth so that he could free us both, his biggest evidence of love. He never asked me to stay and never apologized. Some addicts kill their spouses instead of facing this conversation. The desire to remain in the dark runs that deep. But he hadn't taken that road. It took him not just those first long days to spit out the truth, but years to work up the courage to tell me. He was completely lost but still had some humanity left.

The Hyde monster I now faced terrified me, but more than anything, I felt I was watching a good man slowly disappear, struggling to hold onto his soul, and losing. We didn't have any kids, and for that I feel blessed. Addicts fall into the same pathological category as pedophiles and sexual predators, and I have met women now who say that their addict ex-spouses have indeed victimized their own children or children's friends once they enter adolescence. An unreformed addict has no healthy boundaries; that's what defines them. I don't know of any clear research done on this area yet that's been made widely available—but D had already given me all the proof I needed to know I wouldn't have trusted him with my children.

Though he sought therapy, he found only walls and denial from his macho therapist. Not only did the therapist deny D's compulsions as problematic, he

told D that he “just wasn’t the marrying kind.” Before I moved out, D visited two different 12-step support groups, the only kind available then. If you lack belief in a monotheistic knowing power, as D did, this model offers little to hold onto. These models also label spouses and partners “co-addicts,” assuming they were knowledgeable of and supporting the addiction, which overwhelmingly, they are not. D decided that the other people there were simply “freaks,” something he was not.

I moved out a few weeks later. Our divorce became final. At the same time, after less than a year of tone-deaf therapy that stressed self-care and permission (“Boys will be boys,” said one mental health professional), D gave up on reform. In our last face-to-face conversation around that time, he told me that he would always have these compulsions, so why fight them? He was no good, and he never would be. He could only continue to lie to the world and hope for the best.

As soon as he found my replacement he disappeared from my life, canceling our only scheduled visit to attempt an apology. He told me he had to go on a bike ride with friends instead and asked me to tell him which of his week’s plans he should skip, which one might I be more important than. We are no longer in contact at my request; only toxicity awaited any future communication. I doubt I have to say what kind of trauma I believe awaits his young family, and any that follow. In lieu of effective treatment, I believe he’ll continue to try to fit society’s expected mold and destroy everyone in his path instead.

My therapist told me the loss of a primary relationship, including the loss of their children, is not enough for most sex addicts to hit a rock bottom turning point. Incarceration or institutionalization is often how low they have to go. Losing public face, losing the trust and privileges that allow them to exploit others—these are real triggers for change. That doesn't mean they *can't* choose to change at any time. Today many wonderful trauma-based programs exist, including Partners of Sex Addicts Resource Center (www.posarc.com) that provide thorough, factual information and honest, non-victim-blaming support—the first place I'd go if this happened now.

For the first six months still in the house with D, and then the first full year after moving out, I felt numb. When you're in survival mode, you have to figure out how you're going to eat, where you're going to live, what your name is going to be. Your brain is helping your heart do what must be done. I didn't have the luxury of much crying. I feel like my head unfroze my emotions slowly, in layers, as I was able to handle each stage.

For quite a while I felt compelled to learn why this had happened. If I just knew that, I'd feel better again. So I kept demanding answers. I know that's why I was so vulnerable in that first year to other people's opinions and judgments. I was essentially asking them not only to explain, but to make sense of my life—which of course they knew nothing about.

Some tried to take sexual advantage of me, believing if it had been done once.... Others believed I must have done something to deserve such a terrible

fate. One married friend even told me I should move in and live on her couch to be her unpaid nanny so that we could still all be happy moms together as she'd always planned.

To be fair, I realize now that I hadn't surrounded myself in my married years with "givers," but people who counted on me to know it all. Naturally, they tried to continue this dynamic. I can't believe I'd isolated myself so completely, or that I thought any of them might have my key to balance. But I just felt so desperate then. Trauma like this eradicates your faith in your own judgment, your own instincts, because you feel they led you to disaster.

At the end of my first year solo, I took a trip to see family. My sister and I had a great conversation. As she drove us and her kids through the countryside, I had this flash—the compulsion to ask her a question. I spoke up before I lost my nerve.

"How would it be if I moved away from where I am, and just wrote and traveled for a while?"

"You know what?" she replied. "None of us know what to do for you. But if you tell us, we will do everything in our power to make it happen."

Unconditional love.

Finally, someone articulated it: Nobody but you has your answers. *You* have to take over the quest to find them. One of the greatest blessings of my life.

So for a year I went to live with my family. I traveled to see friends. I wrote. I was sad for much of it. I spent time deciding, "What am I going to do next?" and giving myself the space that I needed to make that choice. I tried several kinds of writing, settled on

television and screen, and used my small divorce settlement to go back to school, from which I've recently graduated. I'm all in. It feels freaking fantastic.

As I mentioned, part of the trauma of learning your partner is a sex addict is feeling that your whole life has been a lie. I came to realize that *my* life wasn't a lie. I loved him. My reality, my love and my commitment to D was real. He drew away from that. He escaped into fantasy because for whatever reason, he couldn't accept the happiness that was offered him. That happiness was real, whether he chose to live in it or not.

As for trusting myself, I have that back now—mostly. Again, time has been my best friend in re-establishing that. I continue making decisions that do *not* end up with my life on the cutting room floor, which is reassuring. I'm perpetually ready to take the next leap. Each one I take makes me feel more stable.

Living through D's addiction shook my faith not merely in one man, but in the entire world. Distrust is an ugly legacy, but one that an addict who lives on lies thrust into my life. During his disclosure, D told me everyone was a liar, like him. That no one loved me unconditionally, not even my best friends or family. They might love some parts of me, but no one loved all of me. I was just dumb enough to believe others' deceit. Dumb enough to believe in honesty. All this damage so that *he* didn't feel badly about loving me less, about deceiving me.

He was wrong.

Conditional love isn't love. It's false hope to hook you into staying and feeding someone else's power mania. And someone who only deals in power is incapable of recognizing true love, the kind my family and friends continue to lavish on me.

My true friends have hung on for the long haul. I lost the false ones quickly. I've also made many amazing new ones—much more in line with who I want to become—who are passionate about the same things I am and are truly supportive.

I'm happy. I'm not dating, nor am I interested. If that changes, it won't be because I need someone else's approval. It will be because they like me just the way I am. The horrible loneliness that caused all those crushes and agonies disappeared the moment I moved out. For all of this, I've never been prouder of myself. I'm blessed to have crazy amounts of love in my life, and I will never hold myself so cheap again.



“It’s time mothers emerged from hiding and embraced their sexual passions.” – Dani Longman



SEX AND MOTHERHOOD

Unless you count pets, I'm not a parent. I can only imagine the challenges raising little ones can bring to one's intimate life, and life overall. Many moms struggle to make time for themselves to simply rest or relax in small increments, much less savor sensual play. When they finally do have spare time, sex may not top their priority list—if it appears there at all. I do know that the more work and stress we have in our lives, the more important intimacy is.

In many people's minds, motherhood and sexuality can't coexist, which is a gargantuan myth; in fact, they're inseparable—and not only because sex creates the baby. Our sexuality is innate. It's part of who we are. If part of your identity is motherhood, it's a crucial element of that, too.

Numerous moms who've appeared on *Girl Boner*® have mentioned the shaming and bullying they've experienced for (gasp!) having sex or (bigger gasp) talking respectfully about sex publicly or even to some friends. This “How dare you?” attitude both

reflects and perpetuates backward thinking in our society that suggests that all things pure, natural and good (i.e., motherhood) are the opposite of anything scandalous (i.e., sex). If I had kids, that is not a message I'd want them to absorb.

It's perfectly normal to have a lower desire for sex at various times throughout our lives—for all genders. But when it becomes a pattern that stands in the way of your authenticity and happiness, libido drop is worth addressing. At minimum, we should ponder such shifts, looking deeper rather than chalking them off as insignificant. You are significant. Your sexuality is significant.

I hope Dani Longman's story will shed light on a possibility some of you busy moms may not have entertained: You can have a spicy, fulfilling bedroom life as a parent. Doing so can benefit not only you, but your whole clan.

Motherhood Happened

by Dani Longman

“Do you feel women have become imprisoned by motherhood?” one of my best friends asked. Three years into motherhood and she had become as “helicopter parent” as one can get, funny to those of us who knew her BC (before children). Once free-spirited and wild, fast-tracking her way to hell, and enjoying every moment of the journey, she was now a Republican politician’s dream woman: waspy, uptight and an embracer of all things that did not involve sex. Hearing news of heaven impatiently awaiting her arrival would not shock me.

“I read an article which said women are ‘turning our backs on sexual freedoms,’ she continued. “The entire piece questioned whether today’s mothers invest too much of themselves in their children, leaving no space for sexual passion.”

Motherhood. Once you’re in, it’s inescapable. Whether relaxing over drinks during a much needed (and much overdue) girls’ night out or elbow deep in the most ungodly diaper explosion, we are, and will always be, mothers.

“Hey!” I said, slightly buzzed. “Someone is not following girls’ night out rule number two. No mom talk, a.k.a. that’s what texting during the week is for.”

Two minutes ago we had been discussing Brenda losing her virginity to Dylan and Jason Priestley getting it on with almost every female his character had dialogue with. Now we were embarking on a

journey down the rabbit hole; the one conversation all women have. Over and over and over again. For such a taboo, stigmatized topic, sex sure does get discussed (in a mostly hushed tone, of course). A lot.

“But to answer your question, yes. I think you and to an extent, you...” I said, swinging my finger between the girls, “and most of the mom-osphere are imprisoned by motherhood. I sent you the damn article, remember?” I laughed. “Do you have other friends emailing you articles written by Erica Jong, subtly hinting it’s time to remove the mom hat for five minutes? Which, ironically, is the maximum amount of time needed to have a quickie in the bathroom.”

Imprisoned by motherhood. The words and ongoing discussion had me thinking. I am a mother—of five kids and *not* counting—who embraces motherhood to the fullest, while simultaneously embracing womanhood, my sexuality and sexual passions included.

“Can we really be imprisoned by anything?” I added. “I mean, we all have the ability to make choices. You can have it all, motherhood and sexuality, but you must choose to want it all.”

As mothers, we’ve allowed our sexuality to become a victim in the mom-ospheric quest to have it all, do it all and attain it all. Gone are the days of quickies in the bathroom, BJs on the couch and date night with your spouse. Motherhood comes first, last and only; everything else has been placed on hold. I question how the once sexually adventurous women became “imprisoned by motherhood,” finding themselves listed on the sexually endangered list; how

two women who religiously met me every Sunday night to watch *Sex and the City*, who rolled their eyes at magazine headlines promising to bring the “sexy” back into any relationship, now sat across from me, rolling their eyes at my question: “Why aren’t either of you having sex?”

“Because I feel like a sagging shell of my former self,” one of my friends finally said. “Do you remember back in the day when we were twenty-something girls? We were spontaneous and wild, up for whatever, whenever. We were toned, tan and had the ability to fuck at will. Now all three of us know how not sexy fucking at will is, when panty liners are sandwiched between our panties and vaginas.

Obviously, we picked the short stick when deciding who would go through life experiencing the discomforts of PMS, bloody vaginas, pregnancy, motherhood, aging, womanhood, life. I am a mom, nothing more, nothing less. Exhausted at any moment of any day, spending every ounce of energy I can muster caring for my kids. I don’t have extra time, energy, or a sex drive to fuck. Hell, I don’t have the heart to tell my husband he is now married to a perimenopausal, vintage version of me.

“Vintage is the new chic. Embrace it, baby,” I said.

“I’m ignoring you,” she said. “Seriously. Sex used to be awesome...welcomed...wanted. Now it feels nothing more than an added chore on my never-ending to-do list. A show of appreciation for putting up with my hormonal, imprisoned mommy self.”

I understood where she was coming from. Every mother knows how exhausting, demanding, fulfilling and, at times, smothering, motherhood is. I get that the burden of childrearing has—and probably always will—fall on us mothers. I get how hard and overwhelming motherhood is/can be/will always be.

Most days, I wake up still exhausted from the day before. Some days, I wake up wanting a day off from the responsibility of caring for the cohabitating humans in my home. By day's end, when the laundry is washed, food is cooked, homework is done, sport practices are over and shower time is complete, I am exhausted, depleted, and questioning whether my parenting decisions have, in some small way, improved my children's lives or given them another topic to discuss on a shrink's couch years from now.

But *motherhood* isn't cock-blocking our sexuality. Motherhood isn't interfering with our ability to fuck. Our choice to not remove the motherhood hat is hindering this facet of our womanhood from shining. We are cock-blocking ourselves from enjoying a much-deserved and overdue orgasm. To have it all, one must choose to want it all.

Looking across the table, I wondered if my friends missed the physicality of sex, the intimacy or the passion.

“Seriously, you two,” again swinging my finger between them. “Why are neither of you having sex? We are all the same age. We are all, in a way, shells of our former selves. That is not a good enough answer. We are all mothers and I seem to be the only one who can remember the last time she came.”

“You aren’t the norm,” one of them said. “You are the exception to the parenting rule. Most women don’t do it multiple times a week once motherhood is bestowed upon them.”

“Bullshit,” I snapped back. “I am not some alien being living undercover in the mom-osphere. I am a woman, a mom, a spouse, who hasn’t allowed motherhood to imprison me. I enjoy being more than ‘just a mom.’ Each day, I make a conscious decision to embrace all of me—my motherhood, my womanhood, my sexuality. I love being a mom. I am a damn good one. But, being a mom doesn’t mean I can’t fuck my husband. It doesn’t mean I can’t embrace my sexuality, my needs, or myself. Using motherhood as an excuse is a copout. It’s an avoidance factor. What happened to the girls I knew? The girls who were secure? Confident? Sexual?”

“Motherhood happened,” they said, almost in unison.

“No,” I said back. “You have chosen to sit back and watch your fully functioning vaginas turn into safe houses for the word ‘no’ and all the other variations of it. Stop living each day in a perpetual state of motherhood. Mommies are allowed to take timeouts. So, take one and have a quickie in the bathroom. Do it right before you head off to that godawful Mommy and Me class. You’ll be glowing. The other moms will probably think you’re high...which, in a sense, you will be.”

Another round of cocktails appeared in front of us. We laughed. “Imprisoned,” became the word of the evening.

Later that night, after confirming motherhood hadn't infiltrated my sex life rendering my vagina useless, I lay awake, wondering what was going on inside the mom-osphere.

Motherhood is, at times, a lonely journey of trial by error. One "wrong" step and thirty people judge you from the sidelines, racing to critique your fall. Some will applaud your landing. Others will gasp at your misstep. Inadequate feelings of "not enough" plague us.

We shy away from orgasms as if attaining one sounds a silent alarm inside the Motherhood Police Station. Embracing one's sexuality is a recurring nightmare rather than an enjoyable reality. Feelings like confidence, beauty, and sexiness, when daily showers are considered a luxury, do not get felt. Looking in a mirror reveals what we have suspected: the person we once were is there, kind of, but looking a bit more tired, with a little more baggage under the eyes and in desperate need of a haircut.

As mothers, we have learned to juggle hundreds of tasks a day. We wear two hundred different hats at any given moment. Yet, we fiercely resist our sexuality, forgetting that our vaginas still work after childbirth, and turning our sexual desires into burdens rather than regular and frequent *mommy timeouts*. We ignore the burning desire to be touched by our partner, giving into exhaustion, self-doubt, and low self-esteem.

Like motherhood, we doubt our sexuality, questioning why and how our spouses could be attracted to the woman who kind of, sort of, resembles

her pre-motherhood self. To avoid facing the fears and self-doubt, we shy away from our sexuality as if it were the plague. We jump headfirst into the lives of our children, tending to their every need and want. We forget that hidden behind the motherhood façade is a woman who desperately needs to hear and believe she is beautiful, wanted, sexy, and loved.

Ingrained in a woman's DNA is the need to nurture, protect, and love her children. What women are failing to remember, or maybe choosing to ignore, is our deeply rooted need to be sexual beings. By being everything for our children, we have become shitty partners to ourselves (and our spouses) by neglecting our sexuality, our desires, our womanhood, and our orgasms. We are forgetting who we were before the *M* was branded upon our foreheads.

The burden to be *super mom* is a weight which never leaves our shoulders. Motherhood is a 24/7, never-ending, thankless job, doing more for others than we will ever do for ourselves. I get that motherhood has, at times, more hard days than good; that the societal expectations to love every second of motherhood is an unrealistic goal we all strive for. But, what I don't understand is, why women have decided to backburner their own wants, needs, and desires, choosing motherhood over womanhood. We can have it all, if we choose to want it all.

I spent my young adult years ashamed of myself and was not always an ally with my sexuality. In college I acted out—rebelled, if you will. Instead of embracing my sexuality (and in turn myself), I was in constant search mode for thirty seconds of pleasure.

Instead of attaining sexual self-worth, I let myself fall into the trap of instant but short-lived gratification. Ashamed I was sexually active, ashamed of the stigma, ashamed of having sex on a first date instead of waiting for society's acceptable time frame to arrive, I questioned why it was acceptable for men to be sexually active, free from ridicule, while I cowered in self-doubt and shame.

Eventually, as in years later, as maturity and womanhood became one within me, I grew to understand that like men, women are sexual beings, free to enjoy their sexual freedoms. Being sexual, experimenting and embracing one's sexuality is healthy, not shameful; beautiful, not vulgar. Healthy, not wrong.

Not until I became a mother did I understand the liberation and power one feels when switching from one aspect of womanhood to another. Choosing to embrace sexual pleasure while navigating the daunting world of motherhood helped me strip away the self-doubt all women and mothers feel. My decision to let go of those hindrances, empowered me.

I'd be lying if I said balancing motherhood and sexuality is easy. Fully embracing one's womanhood is daunting. Some days are easier than others. Some days the overwhelming task of motherhood penetrates the closed door of our bedroom and tries its hardest to keep us from taking that much needed timeout. These are the moments we have to choose to let go of motherhood long enough for the sexual passion to build, transforming us from mother to sex goddess.

At one point or another in our lives, we have all hidden behind the veil of fantasy, shielding ourselves from what we are choosing to ignore. It's time mothers emerged from hiding and embraced their sexual passions. Super Mom is a title we all desire, but it is not the only title we are allowed to wear. It's time to bring the "sexy" back.

It's time to reclaim the woman you once were. It's time to stop being imprisoned by motherhood. It's time to let your womanhood, your sexual passions, your femininity, shine. It's time to stop saying *no* and start saying *yes* to that well deserved and long-overdue orgasm.

Dani Longman is a freelance writer and mom to five. Living the suburban life in South Florida, Dani spends her days trying to balance motherhood, life, and sex. Sometimes she gets lucky. Sometimes she does not. In between shuttling children to sports practices, Dani writes on her blog, RANTish, and has been published both online and print for various websites and news outlets. www.rantish.com



“I love being surrounded by people every day who also feel the need to try new, exciting, sometimes terrifying things. I love helping someone explore fantasies they’ve had secretly for years.” —Mona Darling



Midlife and Beyond

Ah, aging. The process through which everything wilts, wrinkles and dies—including our sex lives.

WRONG.

“Anti-aging” ranks right up there with “slut” as one of my least favorite terms. Embracing our sexuality as we grow older and more experienced is part of embracing aging, a practice our culture’s fixation with youth makes difficult.

Here’s the fabulous news. The idea that women peak sexually in their thirties and it’s all downhill from there? It’s a bunch of hogwash that stems from one tiny study published in the early 1950s, back when aprons ranked high in women’s fashion.

A more recent study published in *JAMA Internal Medicine* analyzed the sexual lives and attitudes about sex of over 600 women ages forty to sixty-five for eight years, and found that women who have positive attitudes about sex are *three times more likely* to stay pleurably sexually active (however they define that) at middle-age than other women—regardless of

physiological factors linked with low sex drive, such as menopause.

When we see sex and sexuality as an ever-unfolding journey worth treasuring, the whole darn world opens up. Try it. You'll see.

Forty-Something and Frisky

by Mona Darling

I'm not sure where I pictured myself at forty-six. It seemed so far away, until one day I woke up and the forty-six-year-old me was looking back at me in the mirror, just as shocked as I was. She looked surprisingly good for forty-six. A mix of red, pink and purple cover my gray hair, my slightly out of date bifocal prescription covers my fine lines and wrinkles. (I highly recommend this. It's like having your own personal soft focus, although it makes finding your eyelashes to put mascara on rather difficult.) And when I stand up straight, and turn to a certain angle, even I find it hard to believe that I have given birth to four children.

I'm not sure where I pictured myself at forty-six, but I'm pretty sure re-entering the sex industry was not one of the options about which I spent time daydreaming. I've been a professional dominatrix since I was in my mid-twenties, but for the last five years I have all but retired to take care of my child. Now that she's starting school, it seemed a natural progression to head back to the dungeon. After all, isn't that what stay-at-home moms do when their kids are all in school? Head back to work?

I was excited about returning. I missed the excitement. I missed the kink. I missed the camaraderie with other women. I missed the toys and the outfits. And of course, I missed the income. But the reality of re-entering a field dominated (pun intended)

by twenty-something underwear models as a soft-fleshed forty-something who prefers comfortable underwear was intimidating.

Forty-something is when women become invisible—or at least, translucent. We aren't generally young enough to procreate, not old enough for others to give up their seat to on the train. Forty-something is when you stop bothering to put on make-up or comb your hair to run to the grocery store because you have so many other obligations and no longer care what strange men think. Forty is when you stop experiencing street harassment every time you leave the house—which reminds you perpetually that you are indeed over forty.

Forty-something is when women are mocked for their aging looks, or failed attempts to appear forever young. Forty is when you start fading into the background. Not when you start posting pictures of your cleavage on-line to attract new clients.

I look at these young girls with their smooth supple skin and can't help but compare it to mine—which is starting to get that dry crepe-like texture of age, no matter how much I exfoliate and moisturize. I see their firm tight asses in G-strings and strappy fetish underwear that would make my hips look like sausages in casings, aging to perfection—a delicious visual, perhaps, but not a sexy one.

I wonder if the young women I work with feel as unsure in their bodies as I did at that age. I always felt like I had to be taller or firmer. That my hair needed to be less unruly and my skin clearer. I harshly criticized my soft breasts and stretch marks from the children I

gave birth to as a teen. Now I wish I had that imperfect younger body back or could go back in time and convince myself to love it more.

I pull my untouched fetish-wear from storage and try to salvage what I can. Most is far too small at this point. I was blessed with a fast metabolism, until the birth of my daughter when it slowed to a crawl. Now the beautiful corsets and fetish-wear that I once hid my young body behind do nothing but confirm how much weight I've gained and pick holes at my self-esteem.

When you work in the sex industry, especially the fetish industry, you learn that everyone has different tastes. Sure: tall, thin, blonde and busty is always going to be popular. But I've watched time and time again as a short, heavy, self-assured brunette out-earns the insecure traditional beauty.

Self-confidence and healthy self-esteem are sexy at any weight, height or hair color. This is something I preach.

But ditching my yoga pants and stepping back into the fetish world has certainly put that idea to the test. Am I still sexy? Or will people look at me and see what I see: a forty-something mother of four and grandmother of six? Someone who should be at home baking cookies or educating people about sexual wellness? Probably not someone strapping on a dildo and making fantasies come true for a living.

I know that sexuality is ageless. At least the logical part of my brain does. My self-esteem says something else. My self-esteem says my partner can see my aging body. He's married me. He's obligated. But showing

my aging body to strangers, on the internet? My self-esteem is pretty sure that is a bad idea. Photoshop can only go so far. Plus, no one wants to show up for a paid sexual excursion and be greeted by a woman who looks nothing like the photos they've been masturbating to.

Sexuality may be ageless, but at what point do you stop selling it when it's your livelihood? I have college degrees and other ways of making ends meet, but working as a dominatrix is by far my favorite vocation. The only thing that scares me more than other people thinking I'm too old for this is ME thinking I'm too old for this.

The reception I've received since heading back to work full time has made me realize that I am not too old, but I'm not selling the same thing as I was twenty years ago. I'm not selling the same thing as those twenty-something underwear models. I'm selling experience. I'm selling curves and softness. I'm selling a more mature, more maternal persona. And I'm okay with that.

Being comfortable with yourself is a big part of self-esteem, and sexy, no matter what your age, weight or body style. Comfort with yourself comes from knowing what you want, what you are willing to try and what you need to explore. It comes from not worrying what others think of you or your actions.

When I was younger, I didn't care either, but it was a state of rebellion. I actively wanted the world to know that I didn't give a shit about status quo. I was doing my own thing. I was on my own path. But secretly, I wished I could have fit in better. Now that

I'm older, I'm too preoccupied with living my life to remind the world that I don't care. I sit on the sidelines of normalcy and quietly thank the gods for not letting me achieve that status quo.

Since coming back to dominatrix work, I've been reminded why I loved it in the first place. It's the mental aspect. I love to explore people. Any time I look out at a crowded room, I wonder what sexual secrets each of the people are hiding. I wonder if any of them are wearing panties under their suits or have their partners in chastity belts. I wonder if any of them have tied up their partner or have fantasies about being spanked by their spouse. I wonder how many of them have fantasies that they will never explore for fear of being shamed for them. I wonder how many see a professional like me as an outlet. Being a *pro domme* lets me find much of this out. People confess their fantasies and ask me to help enact them.

I want to see and do it all. I would rather try something and decide I hate it than fail to explore it. I love being surrounded by people every day who also feel the need to try new, exciting, sometimes terrifying things. I love helping someone explore fantasies they've had secretly for years.

I have re-entered both the work force and a large sisterhood; many of the women are also in their thirties and—*gasp*—forties. Just as when I first entered the adult industry and was refreshed to find so many people embracing their bodies, big or small, it's been very affirming to have so many remarkable women around me who share the same worries and concerns that I do, and that most forty-something

women have, but continue to embrace their sexuality not only privately, but publicly. They are strong, amazing, creative and intelligent. To us, the status quo is, if not invisible, at least transparent.

I'm not sure where I pictured myself at forty-six. But I'm very happy with where I've ended up.

Mona Darling spent close to twenty years as an A-list professional dominatrix before becoming a D-list mommy blogger. After spending many years traveling the world being told that she is fabulous, she now spends her days being told she doesn't drive fast enough by her six-year-old daughter. She writes, sporadically, about being a sex-working mom, women's empowerment, dungeon related mayhem, and raising a trans daughter at DarlingPropaganda.com.
www.DarlingPropaganda.com



“I learned that sex does not have an expiration date, and the key to mind-blowing sex is imagination.” — Jann Robbins



Sex after Sixty

by Jann Robbins

When I was growing up and fantasizing about sex, I thought sex after age sixty would be impossible or horrible. I would look at “old people,” some who were probably only forty but ancient as far as I was concerned, and assume they could no longer even think about sex. They were too old and uninterested. Sex was for the young and stereotypically beautiful, I thought—taut muscles, curves, visual assets that were adored and memorialized in movies and great artwork. Old and gross? Never!

Obviously, I had a lot to learn.

My husband, Harold Robbins, brought me the adventure of a lifetime. He was sixty-three when we met, and I was in my thirties. Soon, we were totally, unequivocally in love. By then, he’d written twenty-five best-selling novels that were steamy, hot and banned in some countries. He not only wrote great sex scenes, but created them in real life. He never thought he was too old and was an imaginative lover with the stamina of a thirty year old (and this was before Viagra®).

Over twenty years later at the age of eighty-one, he’d never lost interest in or the capacity for great sex. I believe that being ill at the end of his life was made easier because we never forgot to touch and kiss, make love and hold each other. We never let go of our sexuality.

I learned that sex does not have an expiration date, and the key to mind-blowing sex is *imagination*. It keeps you young. (In the throes of great passion and sex, no one *ever* feels old.) Sex makes you soar, leading you to warmth and tenderness that can't be accomplished in any other way. It's a force of renewal about yesterday, today and tomorrow.

My husband was a great romantic during our fourteen-year relationship. We knew that the foundation of a strong relationship was acceptance of the way we are and never trying to change the other. He never failed to tell me that I was beautiful and how much he loved our life together. I knew I was married to a man who would give me the world if he could and the feeling was mutual.

We shared our lives, building intimacy in the most tender of ways. When I went out to run an errand I always brought back a gift for him—not a big gift. It could have been his favorite pastrami sandwich or a funny cartoon. Small gestures like these are the building blocks to intimacy that cement a relationship. We never forgot the respect and care that we had for each other.

Yes, we had difficult days and challenges that without love would have crushed us, but foreplay was a constant activity in our life together. Even during our occasional arguments we held hands, and never stopped hugging and kissing.

In my sixties, after the difficult experience of losing Harold, I met a man who was twenty-eight. We worked on a project together for several weeks and I found myself looking forward to his presence—not just

because of his gorgeous blue eyes or black belt karate body (though those didn't hurt). It was the ways he made me laugh and feel. Quickly, I became a cougar!

He taught me how to play again, in life and in the bedroom. He lit up my world, and I gave him a new experience. While other women wanted to marry him, settle down and have kids he wasn't keen on, our relationship was fun and untangled from burden. Through our adventures, I found healing.

Maybe by sixty you gain the wisdom to allow love to rule your day. Making love brings a new power into a relationship—the power of giving and less inhibition. As long as you have a mindset of “I'll try anything once,” there is no limit to the satisfaction that you can experience. Welcome it, or you could limit your adventures.

Now, my sex life allows each moment of love to be enriched by who I am and the love I hold for myself. It's a perpetual youth serum. If you embrace age rather than fight it, your realized self becomes a powerhouse. Don't shut down your senses or pretend you don't want or need sex anymore. Know that you aren't any less deserving than you were earlier on.

My sexuality has grown and ignited through each new decade of life, and my curiosities and discoveries continue. What a wonderful trip I have had while keeping my mind open and fresh. Sex after sixty is not only possible, it can be exciting, enriching and enticing. With each new encounter I find new mystery and adventure to enjoy.

I have always felt that each moment of lovemaking, regardless of age, carries its own unique

magic—and sex after sixty has confirmed that. My “Will you still love me tomorrow?” mindset as a teenager grew into “I love *myself*” today. Over time, I’ve discovered that love is in every moment, and is about giving and receiving. Or as the Beatles said, “The love we make is equal to the love we take.” My sixties brought a quiet contentment with no rules.

I feel more and give more now, and have found that concern over how we “should” look and move only stand in the way of discovering what’s in the moment. I see beyond the façade of what society says is sexy-cool. Why do others’ opinions matter in *my* bedroom? I didn’t have this sense of freedom when I was younger.

Some women I’ve talked to are angry about the past. Some criticize others endlessly. Others are prone to self-ridicule. Others are so sure that life is over, they feel apathetic and are literally waiting to die. Some let their religious beliefs convince them they’re wrong or sinful for desiring or prioritizing sex. (Even *Jesus* was all about love and giving.) Don’t let any of these culprits dry up your desire to live and love. No one can stop you, if you don’t stop yourself. Live freely and never say no to a great adventure. Your body of love is a gift of infinite expression.

Jann Robbins, editor, author and ghostwriter, worked for the fifth-best-selling author in the world, Harold Robbins, as an editor when she arrived in Los Angeles. In 1992 Harold and Jann were married. Jann later co-authored *Hope and Honor*, the life story of General Sidney Shachnow, and was awarded the prestigious William Colby Award for Best Non-Fiction Novel. After Harold's passing, she authored *Harold & Me*, called "today's most accurate picture of the world-famous author and the love of his life, Jann Robbins," by critics. Most recently, Jann has been involved in the upcoming life story of Josie Harris and her life with world champion boxer, Floyd Mayweather. For more about Jann Robbins, visit her website at haroldrobbinsnovels.com.



“What women really need is faith in themselves, pride in their capabilities, the ability to embrace their fine qualities and to not worry about what the world perceives.” — Velda Brotherton



Women's Battle to Make History

by Velda Brotherton

Often I meet older women who are reluctant to hear the word *sex* spoken in conversation. Because I am an “older woman,” I’m appalled at those who go through life without embracing their own femininity. They have never known the true joy that can live within their souls.

Because I write historical romances, the research I do reveals some of the major problems women have faced over the centuries. Since coming to America, women have run the gamut of horrors. In the 1800s only a few extraordinary women broke out of the mold. Women could not own property except in extreme circumstances. If a husband died, the property was passed on to the children and she was at their mercy. Furthermore, there were only a few jobs open to women left in such a situation. They could take in laundry. If educated, they could teach school—but the rules there were abominable. They could clean houses, and they could become “whores.” Also known as “ladies of the evening” or “doves,” they were paid for sexual services.

No woman could hold an office in the government until 1870, when the first woman was allowed to serve as Justice of the Peace in the territory of Wyoming, the first state to allow women to vote in 1869. It would be many more years before women could vote nationwide. The “freeing” of women from such ridiculous restraints was long in coming, and women

died to get the rights we enjoy today. Yet some ideas regarding the feminine mystique continue to befuddle society.

“Well behaved women seldom make history,” is a quote batted around and attributed to everyone from Marilyn Monroe to Eleanor Roosevelt. Actually, it was first written by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich in an academic paper in an issue of *The American Quarterly* published in 1976. And it contains some truth.

In the Old West, Calamity Jane is a fine example of a woman who misbehaved. She broke out of the mold to embrace her strengths and femininity. And to this day everyone knows her name. Tough minded with a strong tongue, she dared anyone to tell her what she could do. We may not approve of some of her shenanigans, but she is a woman to be admired for her refusal to let any man own her, or let any woman place her in the typical role of the day. There were a few others like her and they each made history in their own way.

A distant relative of mine, Clara Barton, is another fine example. She cared for men wounded in battle when no other woman dared to touch the body of a man. Around 10,000 women went into photography after the Civil War, brave enough to try something new and different when society forbade it. Both Eleanor Roosevelt and Marilyn Monroe, to whom this saying is attributed, didn't exactly cling to the decorum of their day. They broke out and tracked new footprints in the sands of history. I doubt either of them will ever be forgotten.

As a young woman maturing in post-war America, I was the only girl in a group of three boys. We did everything together—climbed trees, walked downtown to see Saturday matinees and played rough and tumble games like football. As a tomboy, touching and being touched while enjoying these activities seemed normal to me. I thought nothing of it until I was suddenly told one day that I was growing up and had to quit playing with the boys—not by my mother, but by my grandma, a Victorian lady who I later learned undressed for bed in the closet so my grandpa would never see her naked.

My mother was like most mothers of that era. I remember an older friend at work had to tell me how to use a tampon after I was fully grown. Discussions about the female body just didn't happen at home. It's no wonder that so many of us grew up more afraid of our femininity than comfortable with it.

As I grew older and began to date, I was enthralled at how my body tingled when a boy kissed me with ardor. No one had explained this to me except for one term in high school, when we were lectured about our bodies and the dangers of getting pregnant. The word “dangers” automatically stole any enjoyment from the lessons. As a result, young women and men of that era rushed to marriage to cure that amazing and astonishing itch to enjoy what was forbidden. Good girls did not have intercourse before marriage. Good boys did not marry the few who did. It's no wonder that the divorce rate has climbed since those marriages.

A lot was left out of that high school course, believe me. Some words used for having sex and for our body parts I didn't even hear until I'd been married a while. Frankly, enjoying sex didn't occur to me for quite some time. Married at seventeen and having my first child the month after I turned nineteen was life slamming me in the face. The sexual pleasures I had were during foreplay, the non-invasive kind. It was years before I enjoyed intercourse. Why? A lack of education. When sex was discussed it was presented as dirty, unspeakable, forbidden. I feared enjoyment lest it brand me as wicked.

Growing up meant entertainment of all sorts. Books, movies, plays, serials, mysteries and the like on the radio gave young women a false notion of their own empowerment and sexuality. Educated to marry and have children, to obey the man we loved, and most of all to "not make waves," we hadn't a clue what power we could have over our own destinies. As a result, many of us did not enjoy appeasing our sexual desires. Some never learned; others later opened up their minds to the possibility that it was okay, even fun, to delight in being a sensual human being. Each generation has advanced more to discussions such as this. And it's a good thing, a freeing experience.

In Kansas in 1950 there was much ado about a movie titled *The Outlaw*, released in 1943 and banned in Kansas. It starred Jane Russell and Jack Beutel. PR buzzed about a scene where both are in the bedroom on the bed, but Russell's character can only sit on the bed of the wounded outlaw if she keeps both feet on the floor.

Jane Russell was a gorgeous, well-endowed, smart woman. One only had to watch her body language to know she was totally at home in her own skin, that she knew her power and where it lay and no one messed with her. It's hard today to imagine such a situation. We can only wonder what she must have thought about the feet-on-the-floor rule. Censorship was constitutional in Kansas from 1920 through 1968, when movie ratings were created.

This caused most of the viewing public to rise up in protest; to create a demand for something, ban it. And so, under the heavy weight of objections, the movie finally opened to a multitude of people anxious to see what all the fuss was about. I was one of them. In my teens I sensed an underlying power within myself, but couldn't yet identify it. Star struck, perhaps I hoped that Jane Russell could help me with my doubts. I watched her closely. How she moved, the expressions on her face, the way her hair brushed her cheek. She was a beautiful, desirable woman. Was this what being a woman was all about? Being desirable so a man would want her? I was about to find out how dangerous that notion was.

A few months later I stood on a busy street corner in Wichita waiting for a bus. At fourteen I was tall for my age, had long blonde hair, and my body lately had begun to reveal my sexuality. I was not bad looking and I knew it, but had no notion what kind of trouble that could mean at my age. A man walking down the street locked eyes with me and I did my Jane Russell thing. I smiled, put one hand on my hip, tossed my long hair and tilted my breasts upward. He smiled

back, stopped and approached me. At that point, my heart hammered. My smile froze and I had no idea what to do. What had I done? It was exciting and scary at the same time.

He told me he had this marvelous rock collection and thought I might like to see it. Admittedly an odd choice on his part, but I did happen to like unusual rocks.

However, my own power shriveled as I realized that he was dangerous and much stronger in ways I couldn't even guess at. Thankfully, a red flag went up and I backed off. Because I was surrounded by people, he left when I declined. Fear rode with me and I hurried home to tell my mother, who called the police. Such a big deal was made of this man's attempt to get me to go with him that I was terrified for weeks.

Yet I remained entranced by my ability to attract such attention.

Today, more than sixty years later, the societal pendulum has swung so far in the opposite direction that I'm fearful for young women. They are in as much danger of being taken advantage of now as we were then. They are encouraged to have breast implants and nose jobs and wrinkles removed and liposuction and to starve themselves until they are dangerously thin. All to what purpose?

This is not the only problem facing women today. Beautiful women are perceived as unintelligent. It's as if plain is smart but lacking sensuality, while beautiful is dull-witted and over-sexed—when in reality both can be strong-willed as well as brilliant. What women really need is faith in themselves, pride in their

capabilities, the ability to embrace their fine qualities and to not worry about what the world perceives.

It's important that women have the courage to say *no* to any suggestion that offends them and *yes* when life opens a door to the big wide world that awaits them. And if that door doesn't open when they want it to, they should kick it down.

From historical romance to mystery and women's fiction, **Velda Brotherton** writes sexy, dark and gritty stories about strong women with the ability to conquer life's difficult challenges. Tough heroines, strong and gentle heroes and villains to die for, all live in the pages of her novels. Her mystery series, *A Twist of Poe*, and a mainstream novel, *Beyond the Moon*, are set in Arkansas, where she lives.

www.veldabrotherton.wordpress.com

Moving Forward: Embracing Your Full Self

No matter where you are in your sexual journey, it *is* an embraceable one. If that seems redundant by now, so be it. Some messages need to be restated perpetually until they begin to settle in.

If you're not where you'd like to be as far as acceptance and celebration of your sexuality go, take a deep breath and remind yourself that it can change. Practice patience and gentleness with yourself. Look inward, knowing that the answers you desire most lie there, just waiting to be discovered when the time is right.

To help you along, here are some questions to consider about your own path. Read and consider them silently. Journal about them. Talk them out with your partner, a trusted friend or a therapist. Regardless of the format, what matters is the honest exploration.

What did you learn in sex education?

What did you learn about sex and sexuality from others growing up?

What sexual orientation do you most identify with? Do you embrace it?

When did you first masturbate? What was that like?

What was your first sexual experience with another like?

If you've endured sexual abuse or trauma, how does it affect your life and sexuality now? If you're struggling, might you seek support?

How do you feel about porn?

What are your wildest, sexiest fantasies? Which could you safely play out?

If you could wave a magic wand and change one thing about your sex life, what would you change?

Do you know deeply, without a shred of doubt, that your sexuality is embraceable?

(I promise you, it is.)

About the Author

August McLaughlin is a nationally recognized health and sexuality writer, radio personality and host and creator of Girl Boner®. Her work appears in DAME Magazine, LIVESTRONG.com, the Huffington Post and more. Kirkus Reviews called her first novel, *In Her Shadow*, “an engaging story with an inventive structure and an intriguing focus on body-image issues.” Each week on Girl Boner® Radio, she interviews relationship experts, celebs and more, exploring women’s lives and sexuality “like no one else.” Known for melding personal passion, artistry and activism, August uses her skills as a public speaker and journalist to inspire women to embrace their bodies and selves, making way for fuller, more authentic lives. www.augustmclaughlin.com

*For more on the subjects in this book, including interviews with contributing authors, subscribe to Girl Boner® Radio on iTunes.

Acknowledgements

I'm eternally grateful for the many people who helped make this book possible, including the phenomenal women who shared their stories, my brilliant friend and editor Mike Sirota and my beloved husband and adventure partner, Mike, who has cheered me on from day one.

I'm also thankful for Jennifer Redmond for providing an extra set of expert eyes, Emily Ford for her gorgeous cover artistry, Jennifer Lewis Oliver for being the perfect Author Sidekick, my Girl Boner® Radio production team at Global Voice Broadcasting for helping me broaden my reach (and have a blast doing it), my family for always believing in me and every person who takes the time to read or listen to my work.

Resources and Recommended Reading

Asexuality and sexual orientation

The Asexual Visibility & Education Network:

www.asexuality.org

LGBTQ Nation: www.LGBTQNation.com

Eating disorders

National Eating Disorders Association:

www.nationaleatingdisorders.org

Sex ed

Planned Parenthood: History of Sex Ed in the United States

Condom Nation; Alexandra M. Lord; 2009

Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews; Abstinence-Only Programs for Preventing HIV Infection in High-Income Countries; 2009

Foundation for Sex Positive Culture: www.thefspc.org

Sex addiction

Always Turned On: Sex Addiction and the Digital Age;

Robert Weiss and Jennifer P. Schneider; 2015

Partners of Sex Addicts Resource Center:

www.porsarc.com

Your Sexually Addicted Spouse; Barbara Steffens, PhD
and Marsha Means, MA; 2010

Sex and relationship therapy

American Association of Sexuality Educators,
Counselors and Therapists: www.aasect.org

Megan Fleming, PhD: www.greatlifegreatsex.com

Sexual desire

Psychological Science; A Sex Difference in the Specificity
of Sexual Arousal; 2004

Journal of Personality and Social Psychology; Gender
and Sexual Orientation Differences in Sexual Response
to Sexual Activities Versus Gender of Actors in Sexual
Films; 2007

What Do Women Want? Adventures in the Science of
Female Desire; Daniel Bergner; 2014

The Sex & Pleasure Book; Good Vibrations Guide to
Great Sex for Everyone; Carol Queen, Ph.D with Shar
Rednour

Sexuality and aging

Annals of Family Medicine; Correlates of Sexual Activity
and Satisfaction in Midlife and Older Women;
July/August, 2015

National Institute on Aging: Sexuality in Later Life

Surviving sexual assault

Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network: www.rainn.org

National Sexual Violence Resource Center:
www.nsvrc.org