

The Sexual Lives of Girls

Both women and girls told me sexual stories—truths, partial truths, memories, but stories nonetheless. Storytelling is community building, the cultural theorist Ken Plummer tells us. In the 1960s, after centuries of silence, women began to tell their stories of coercion and rape, in books, consciousness-raising groups, and “Take Back the Night” rallies. These individual stories created one large historical narrative about the lives of women. It served to bring women and girls together, together in their victimization.

Storytelling can also be subversive. It can change the way we view the past and it can overthrow what we think is normal to create new norms. The public form of storytelling takes individual acts of rebellion and unruliness, brings them together as a body of stories, and by virtue of making them “women’s stories” (rather than Judy’s or Mary’s or Ling’s story) gives them a power all their own.

But there is no larger story about women’s passions and sexual energy. In sex education classrooms, in girls’ and women’s novels, and in our conversations with one another, the sexual stories shared most easily are those about victimization and restraint rather than about pleasure and desire. Telling sexual stories of childhood addresses this lack from the bottom up. Sexuality does not begin at thirteen. And if we tell these beginning stories aloud, we give energy and space to a hidden part of the lives of girls and women. Because sexual play and games are acts of resistance, experiments in “girlness” and sexuality, sharing these narratives liberates all women.

What do we reform by telling these sexual stories of girlhood?

- We make it okay for girls to have human feelings of sex and aggression.
- We encourage them to develop spaces in which they feel powerful.
- We allow them to find spaces in which they feel sexual, even as children, especially as girls.

Who would deny our daughters this power? Who would deny them this knowledge? We would. We deny them this understanding almost unconsciously as we preserve some ideal of childhood innocence, treat sex as something shameful and dirty, and write sex education curricula to focus on victimization, disease, and pregnancy. Despite these structures, girls seek out knowledge to make themselves more powerful personally and interpersonally. They mostly do so, though, behind closed doors.

These are secret stories, stories rarely told, and as such, their telling brings with it a certain power. The African-American poet feminist Audré Lorde wrote, "[K]nowledge is power. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our own lives."

Marie Howe, in her poem "Practicing" (cited in full following), writes of the power of the erotic, even in seventh-grade girls. In this poem, with her use of the words "love poem," "hymn," "song," we learn that what might have been called "practicing" was more than "just" practice. In somebody's "parents' house," that is, the house that heterosexual romance built, there are some things that go unsaid. And what remains unsaid is not a story of lesbian romance (though many girls fear that it is). It is a story of girls' bodies and girls' pleasure, their sense of power in that pleasure, a story rarely told. Part One of this book wants to tell that story.

Practicing

By Marie Howe

I want to write a love poem for the girls I kissed in seventh grade,
a song for what we did on the floor of the basement

of somebody's parents' house, a hymn for what we didn't say but
thought:

That feels good or I like that, when we learned how to open each
others' mouths

how to move our tongues to make somebody moan. We called it
practicing, and
one was the boy, and we paired off—maybe six or eight girls—and
turned out

the lights and kissed and kissed until we were stoned on kisses,
and lifted our
nightgowns or let the straps drop, and Now you be the boy.

Concrete floor, sleeping bag or couch, playroom, game room,
train room, laundry.

Linda's basement was like a boat with booths and portholes
instead of windows. Gloria's father had a bar downstairs with
stools that spun,
plush carpeting. We kissed each other's throats.

We sucked each other's breasts, and we left marks, and never
spoke of it upstairs

- outdoors, in daylight, not once. We did it, and it was

practicing, and slept, sprawled so our legs still locked or crossed, a
hand still lost

in someone's hair . . . and we grew up and hardly mentioned who
the first kiss really was—a girl like us, still sticky with the
moisturizer we'd

shared in the bathroom. I want to write a song

for that thick silence in the dark, and the first pure thrill of
unreluctant desire,

just before we made ourselves stop.

Chapter 1

"I'll Show You Mine If You Show Me Yours"

"If somebody saw us doing this, they would think it was very, very wrong."

—Lynn, African American, 41

Why do children pull down their pants for one another? Curiosity is one reason. Girls want to see what's "down there" if the other child is a boy. And girls want to see other girls to compare them to themselves. They wonder, Does it look different? Has a friend started growing pubic hair yet? Another reason is that they're show-offs! Girls try to show their panties to the boys on the playground by hanging upside down on the monkey bars, while boys may surprise girls by whipping it out in the most unusual places. "I'll show you mine" games are exhibitionistic, like the girls' games of striptease played at slumber parties. "Playing doctor" is generally an excuse to examine the other person's private areas. The main reason, though, that exhibitionism gives the exposé as well as the viewer such a thrill is because private parts are supposed to be private. These acts are forbidden.

"Playing doctor" and "I'll show you mine" are only sexual games to the extent that parents and the culture give body parts an aura of sexuality. And they are only forbidden games to the extent that a culture sees sex as something naughty or bad. One woman who grew up in New York City has a memory of playing doctor on a rock in a lot behind her backyard. What she remembered, though, is her mother coming out of the house screaming

at her. Another woman, an African American who grew up in the sixties, also knew that playing doctor was bad. It was "a sin":

It wasn't a game but it was really like intense curiosity and like having to see absolutely everything. . . . It was something having to do with um, health and investigation. [laughing] Pure science and health. . . . We were aware somehow that if somebody saw us doing this, they would think it was very, very wrong, and we thought we'd get in a lot of trouble and that it was probably a sin too. . . . Even though it was all couched in this doctor medical thing. I don't think we fooled ourselves in the least.

These games are not all sexual in the way that some of the more exciting games of the next few chapters are. In other words, they are not games that always involve feeling sexy, feeling sexual feelings, or even exploring sexual activity, although some children do get a thrill from them. Instead, they reflect the first thing that children are taught about their private parts—that they are "private" for a mysterious reason they don't know yet. Still, they intuit that if their privates are private, the exhibition of them must be something deliciously forbidden.

While more and more parents see these games as an outgrowth of natural childhood curiosity, both parents and professionals set limits outside of which such curiosity is verboten. In a study of over three hundred professionals, Jeffrey Haugaard, a psychologist of human development and family studies at Cornell University, asked social workers and doctoral-level psychotherapists what they thought about four-year-olds undressing together, showing each other their genitals, and "fondling" genital and nongenital areas. Despite questions raised by Haugaard's terminology (How does someone "fondle" a nongenital area?), professionals generally thought most of these acts were acceptable among four-year-olds. Touching another child's genitals, however, even at this young age, was strictly forbidden.

Researchers are being suggestive, though, when they use abuse-evocative terms such as "fondling," especially since many of the professionals whom they surveyed already have been keyed in to the dangers of child-to-child sexual abuse. There is indeed strong documentation showing that children who have been molested by an adult sometimes "act out" that abuse on other children, introducing to the new child "adult" forms of sexuality too soon. It is little surprise, then, that when Haugaard asked pro-

fessionals about eight-year-olds, they answered even more conservatively. About half of the female professionals thought it was still okay for eight-year-old children to undress together, while only a third of the male professionals did. About 40 percent of the female professionals thought it was still okay for the eight-year-olds to show each other their private parts, while about 25 percent of the male professionals did. However, very few thought touching was fine (16 percent females; 6 percent males).

For the majority of Americans, not just professionals, nakedness is a sexual act, and we convey this to children. Unlike countries that have nude beaches or where families sauna together, we teach our children that nakedness is sexual. Because there are pedophiles who do view children's naked bodies for sexual pleasure, it would appear that all viewing of such is suspect (as in the controversy over Sally Mann's beautiful photographs of her naked children). Because the parts of the human body deemed sexual are clothed specially (in bathing suits) and sometimes clothed and flaunted provocatively (as in Wonderbras), they become sexually charged in a visual way.

If it were acceptable for children to see each other naked, there would be little interest in "show-me" games. In places where children's nudity is acceptable, such as some U.S. preschools where girls and boys are allowed to share a bathroom, there is no need to hide behind a bush, pull down pants, and ogle. These ogling games are mildly forbidden by adults (more strongly forbidden twenty and thirty years ago) because they indicate to adults an unnatural or dangerous interest in sex. For girls especially, such an interest is considered immodest and unfeminine.

Parents also discourage their girls from expressing too strong an interest in their genitals, confirming the feeling that boys have "something" there, girls have "nothing," a feeling Freud wrote leads to penis envy. If a girl shows an interest in such matters, the adults around her usually wonder whether she was abused or if she is growing up "wild," and whether or not this behavior indicates that she will be a promiscuous teen. Boys defined by the culture as having a greater sex drive, have greater leeway and receive greater understanding from parents in their wishes to play the show-me games.

For Aidee, a seventeen-year-old Puerto Rican girl, sparkly and tomboyish even at seventeen, her "doctor" game confirms to her that she is not "really" a girl. After she played it with a little boy, she thought about this game "a lot of times." She would picture in her head what her mother might say to her, if she only knew:

I'm a bad girl. Like, I don't deserve to be a girl . . . like "you're not really a good girl and you're gonna be a little hot thing!"

It is interesting to see Aidee associate sexual goodness with being a girl. She imagines her mother will not only see her as bad, but as not a girl at all. Being "hot" is not only opposed to being a good girl, but to being a girl, period.

If guilt does not weigh down the girls, when they do expose themselves they often feel a wild exuberance rather than more intimate sexual feelings. Marilyn, for example, felt pure joy when her baby-sitter came to her house and she and her sister got to play the game "Nastigators." That's what the baby-sitter dubbed the game, laughing, but making sure that the girls knew they were being "nasty":

We were little. We used to wear shortie pajamas. You know those? And we would pull the side over and dance around chanting, "See my popo. See my popo." And Lana, the baby-sitter, had a big booming voice, called it nasty. "She's nastigating."

In many women's memories, it was shocking and fun to expose oneself. In fact, the joy was more about exposing oneself rather than about being looked at, an important distinction to make when looking at the relation between girls and power. It might be too easy to call these girls' acts a form of becoming passive objects for boys' gaze, when their true experience of the event may be more akin to the rebel or sexual provocateur.

One adult woman remembered that she and her brothers invited her best friend to join them in what they called

a "naked parade." I think my friend was shocked to see it and I think to be included in it.

Another remembered taking a "naked shower" with a boy when his family was visiting.

And we had a great time. Totally hilarious. And then everybody found out we were in there. And everybody just laughed and chuckled, and you know we were getting away with it, that was the thing. Whenever there was some kind of transgression, I kind of wanted to be discovered. That was, like, part of the fun.

Girls today and in past years have played "truth or dare" games in which they or a friend would have to run around naked outside, or dash into someone's parents' bedroom in her underwear in the middle of the night. Six-year-old Madeleine, who is chatty and opinionated and adorable, described a dare where the girls all had to pull down their pants, put their underpants *over* their pants, and then run out of her bedroom flashing her dad their underwear. As she related her story, it changed a little, and she confessed they actually *exchanged* underwear! They also had to do a little dance in front of the dad of the house.

It was as if these girls were rebelling against what they have been told for years, that these are private parts. In Madeleine's story the girls recognize that the issue of privacy in America extends into the family, where brothers and fathers are to be kept separate from daughters and mothers. A father may bathe his infant or toddler daughter as well as change her diaper, but as a girl grows up there will be a gradual wall built around this physical intimacy, restricting it to hugs and kisses by the elementary school years. There may be good reasons for such separation, but it raises questions and anxieties about these boundaries and what is private about oneself and one's body?

Most exhibition games are between peers—boys to girls, girls to boys. An eighteen-year-old African-American girl, Jennifer, laughing and embarrassed, described a game she played when she was younger with a bunch of kids after school at her baby-sitter's house. The boys and girls together would play a game where the girls would go into a room and strip and then call out, "Okay we're ready," and then the boys would come in and look at them. Then they would switch, and the boys would go into a room and take off all their clothes and the girls would come in when they were ready and look at them. "And we were like, 'Oh my gosh!'" said Jennifer. The boys would make the game more exciting by pretending that the baby-sitter was going to walk in at any moment, "Watch the lady. I hear her coming," they would call out, and the girls would scramble to get dressed.

Susan, a quiet woman who grew up in upstate New York in the sixties and now works as an assistant to a college administrator, remembered

being with a bunch of girls. We would go over to the monkey bars and hang upside down so the boys could see our underwear, which is kind of odd . . . they'd stand around and watch.

In some ways it is surprising that these games are labeled "odd" or "weird" by the girls who play them. They're not even unusual. It is as if they think it is wholly unacceptable for a child, a girl, to want to show off her body. One little girl I interviewed showed horror at the question. When I asked her if she ever, when she was younger, might have played a game with another child like "I'll show you mine if you show me yours," she responded quickly, "Oh no! Never!!!"

The fact that such games are seen as odd or weird speaks to how rarely women have shared such stories, in spite of a public acknowledgment that children "play doctor." It also suggests that these girls assume that such behavior will mark them as sexual rather than as good girls.

In fact, when girls expose themselves to each other, the games sometimes turn into more intricate explorations, and sometimes become integrated into fantasy games. Helen, a baby boomer who grew up in the late 1950s, didn't remember this sexual incident until the day after the interview and called back to tell all:

My cousin and I, when she was about six and I was about eight, . . . used to take baths together at the end of the day. And I do know that we used to sit in the bathtub, and we would kind of sit crossways and look down into our bottom area, and we would pretend that the little piece of tissue that's down there that's probably where our urethra [surely she meant clitoris?] is in between the labia, that kind of sticks out there, we would pretend those were our babies, and we would show each other our babies, you know, and talk about our babies while we were in the bathtub.

Helen and her cousin take a sensitive, sexual body part and find some way to make it acceptable to play with. Mothers are never made to be "sexy" in society's view, not in movies, TV, or advertising, but these girls found a way to incorporate the sexual into a more typical game of being moms!

Freud thought that girls, when they looked down at their bodies and compared what they had to what boys had, discovered they had nothing, a great lack, an absence of a penis. One of the first feminist psychoanalysts, Karen Horney, laughingly pointed out in her essay "Womb Envy" that this is exactly the way a little boy thinks when he sees a girl. The French feminist writer Irigaray has since pointed out, in her essay "The Sex Which Is Not One," the intricacies of women's genitals, our understanding of them, and how what's "down there" affects women's psyches. Girls see stuff down

there. Like Helen and her cousin, even girls in the fifties saw it, but they didn't know what to call it or all the different parts of "it," thus also explaining her mistake of calling a clitoris a urethra. In their game these girls called that part of their vaginal area their babies, allowing them perhaps to play with it and stroke it, and thus transforming codes of sexual behavior to work toward their goal of sexual pleasure.

In the less imaginative games of show, most women remember exchanges with boys. More often than not they remember the boys as initiators of these games. And while girls are curious about themselves and their sexual feelings, as we see in so many of the fantasy games that are in later chapters, they are not (as Freud would have wished) so curious about boys' penises. These "show-me" exchanges are fun and shocking but lack the intensity and strong emotion that the other games have. They're not remembered with much guilt because they mimic, in a sense, adult heterosexuality. Many of the memories are vague, quite possibly because they are usually one-time events and over very quickly.

I do remember a brief incident with a neighborhood boy behind his garage. I think I had been hanging upside down on the monkey bars and I had a skirt on and he was, "If you do that again I'll show you what I have in my pants." That's all I remember. (Linda, white, 53)

We were standing outside in the backyard, and it was, like, "I'll show you mine if you show me yours." . . . I don't remember being apprehensive about it. I just know that it did happen and I just looked at it . . . I think I probably wanted to show. I felt almost honored to be enlightening somebody in that way. "Look at me!" (Jody, white, 21)

I remember being about five and being with a friend of my mother's who had this little boy, and we went in his room and we pretended we were married and what we did was, we kissed. We pulled down our pants and we kissed, although we didn't touch each other. For some reason that's what we thought that you did if you were married, and we gave each other a peck with our pants around our ankles and we pulled our pants up and we went. (Laura, white, 33)

One day Paul said to me, "I want to show you my beetle." And I'm thinking he had a pet beetle and the next thing I know he's got his pants open with a flashlight down his pants. I didn't feel like returning the favor. . . . I think I was just too shocked to do anything. I wasn't expecting that. (Karen, white, 39)

"Honored," shocked, interested—these are the feelings of girls who have these exchanges with boys. Few are caught. All are "enlightened." Most know they are doing something sneaky and possibly wrong. But in retrospect, these are fun memories and delightful experiences. The guilt did not last into adulthood. None have memories that haunt them. They can explain away these experiences as a form of curiosity or just plain fun.

Playing Doctor

Playing doctor is much the same for girls. These "doctor" experiences are like "real life" and are not as sexually provocative as fantasy games. The point isn't even to play "doctor," usually; it is a useful entry to acquiring knowledge, making comparisons, getting "checked out," and doing some "checking" oneself. Perhaps these games are sexually stimulating for the boys, but for the girls the games of dress-up, fantasy, and horror that will appear later in the book capture their sexual excitement so much more completely.

Boy cousins are frequent players in girls' doctor games, sometimes as initiators. Eleanora, a Puerto Rican woman who had been a sickly child, knew how to be a good patient. Even though she described herself as a "goody-two-shoes," she also played doctor with her cousins.

It was the three of us, but it turned out that I was the guinea pig . . . basically all that I can recall is that I was laying down and they had lifted, I guess, my dress. . . . He said that he was the doctor and he was going to examine me, and I was used to being examined because I was always asthmatic, and so I was like the volunteer. Sure. You know. I'm a good girl, I know how to be examined without crying. . . . It was just a lifting up the dress and you feel cold sort of. It wasn't anything beyond that.

Another woman who played doctor with her two male cousins was caught. Her mom and aunt walked in and saw them and told them to stop: "What are you doing?" It wasn't as if they got mad; they were mainly trying to convey "That's not a thing to do."

Some boys tried to talk little girls into exposing themselves:

One time they tried to get me. They invited me into this pup tent and, I think, I don't know what was going on, but, so I went into the tent and

all three of these little boys said, "Okay, we want to play doctor and nurse and we'll be the doctors and you be the nurse and we'll go first. And so they all dropped their pants. I stood there and looked at them, and they said, "Okay, now it's your turn." And I just left. I wasn't gonna drop my pants in front of those three boys. (Maura, white, 47)

Sometimes there was a little guilt. Marilyn, the "nastigator," for example, worried about corrupting her younger sister:

We took baths together and there were three in the tub. We would explore. We found holes, a little thing that looked like a penis, and it was all very fascinating. And later, much later . . . my friend Callie and I, we used to play doctor with my little sister, and she was the patient and the exploree, and we did wondrous things with her. We did. I'm glad that this interview gave me an opportunity to ask my sister what her memories were of the times we played doctor upon her and how she felt about that. And she didn't remember any ill feelings or have any ill feelings about that. Because that was the one thing I was a little concerned about.

Carol also felt guilt. Carol, a Jewish woman living in New York City who grew up in the suburbs in the fifties said:

In his front yard we had built [a fort] so it wasn't, like, for everybody driving by to watch us. I remember he was the doctor and I was the patient. I guess that's true. We didn't have women doctors in those days. I remember I pulled down my [under] pants. I had on a dress. . . . Some-time years later I heard a conversation about this playing doctor, and you know, and that children do this, and I was like, Oh my God, that's what Jack and I did that day and I didn't know that's what it was . . . I don't remember that I ever told anyone about it. . . . when I heard about it afterwards, it was sort of the sense of relief about it, "Oh. That's all it was!!!" I guess somehow I just knew that it was, you know, it was something that nobody should know about.

What makes these doctor games "sexual" after all? The nudity? Because boys show girls their penises? Because girls show boys their vaginas? These are more than sexual parts. To a child these games are just as much forbidden as they are sexual. They are not always about sexual feelings or

thrills. They are not really about learning about sexual responsiveness, except for the thrill of being admired.

When the girls hang upside down on the monkey bars, they're not pretending to be sexual objects for men, as they do when they dress up as stripteasers or pose as models. They are doing something forbidden—showing their panties to boys. While they may have an awareness that adults call these acts sexual and therefore immodest, to them they don't feel sexy. They feel bold and risqué.

These games are permitted by the culture in a way that sexual feelings in children are not. If we stopped our exploration of childhood sexuality here, with games of show-and-tell and doctor, we wouldn't have found out much about the secrets girls keep. If these are secrets that girls keep they are easily disclosed and more about curiosity than sex. For some girls, especially the little ones I interviewed, these were the only kinds of secrets they could tell me about; adult women remember and tell much more.

Zeroing In On: Play. What Is Play? What Is Sexual Play?

What is play? While some have examined the content of girls' play, few researchers have studied the spirit of play—their experiments and their development as sexual beings through the games they play. As a play therapist and a mother I have thought a lot about the healing power of play and the secrets it reveals. D. W. Winnicott, the famous English psychoanalyst, describes certain special qualities about play that I paraphrase below.

1. Play involves fantasy and, because of this, reaches down into the unconscious to bring out secret desires, wishes, and fears.
2. Play involves the mind as well as the body. The child absorbed in play is present both mentally and physically.
3. Play is both real and unreal at the same time.
4. Play is fun as well as utterly serious to the child engaged in it.
5. Play creates a space that is both "me" and "not-me," and in this way reminds the child of the teddy bear or other transitional object that was both a part of her and separate from her. It also is reminiscent of earlier development, when her mother was both a part of her and yet not her.
6. There are no consequences for acts done in play. Or, consequences are "play" consequences. According to Winnicott, a child can walk away from play and not be bothered by what occurred. She can leave the feelings and thoughts that were a part of play there on the playroom floor.

7. Thus, what is secret or hidden can become external. It no longer has to exist only in fantasy in a child's mind; however, because it is play, a girl doesn't have to take responsibility for it.

This is why play is deeply satisfying, as well as why sexual and aggressive parts of the person can materialize in play, especially as parts that are different from the public persona. It is precisely this doubleness that allows play to be fun and exciting—stimulating—at the same time.

The following chapters show many instances of play that is mutually enjoyable and utterly delightful. They also show some play that becomes deeply disturbing to girls, making them feel lifelong guilt. Sometimes play gets too real. Sometimes wishes and fears are brought too close to the surface, and when brought to the surface they contrast too vividly with societal expectations regarding what's proper and befitting a young girl.

Sex is in the mind, researchers have told us for a long time. And play gives us indirect access to the mind of a child. But because it is part real it can disturb, it can make a person feel guilty.

It is difficult to determine the borders of play. When real bodily excitement happens, is it no longer play? When it is a girl from a low-income neighborhood, is it no longer play? There may be cultural expectations that play a role here. When a girl acts sexy, is it still play? When she acts tough? These are questions that the stories of mutual play may help answer.

Girls need to and sometimes succeed at acting out their sexual curiosity. Sometimes it is with great bravado and wildness, leading to some very risky behavior in adolescence, and sometimes it is gradual and furtive and behind closed doors. Most of the play experiences of the girls and women interviewed for this book are overwhelmingly positive, except when they punish themselves through guilt or believe that they are "abnormal."

Chapter 2

Just Practicing: It's in Her Kiss

"You must remember this: A kiss is just a kiss."

—Sam, "As Time Goes By," in the movie *Casablanca*; lyrics by Herman Hopfeld

A kiss may not be "just" a kiss in two of the more common games of childhood. Children kiss in "chase-and-kiss" games, where children chase each other in order to grab and kiss the captured. Girls also kiss each other directly, or each others' hands (which are placed strategically over their mouths), or even sometimes their pillows (while pretending that they are on girl-boy dates). Many children in late elementary school years play structured kissing games such as "Spin the Bottle" and "Truth or Dare," which are meant to introduce them to "real" kissing. They make this distinction between "real" and "practicing"; we may not.

Chase and Kiss

There are three important observations I have about the chase-and-kiss games of childhood:

- Chase-and-kiss games give girls a sense of the power of their sexuality.
- Girls chase, trap, pinch, and pin down boys as frequently as vice versa.

- "Chase and kiss" solidifies a transition for girls, from having boys as friends to seeing them as the "enemy" in a "battle of the sexes."

The sociologist Barrie Thorne sees a copy of the imbalanced gender relations of adulthood in the "chase-and-kiss" playground games. Through these games, she notes that girls are "marked" as sexual beings and boys are meant to avoid being "contaminated" by them. Girls have cooties or see boys as having cooties, and the message is clear: cross-gender contact is potentially dangerous. As Madeleine, that chatty six-year-old who ran around with her underpants outside of her pants, told me, "Boys give cooties; girls give frooties." On her playground, even the words differentiate the germs.

Many women and girls played and play these chase-and-kiss games, and adults remember them fondly; whether it's the girls who chase the boys or the boys who chase the girls varies from school to school. We like to think that in today's world girls are more forward and assertive, but girls chased the boys just as often thirty years ago as they do today. In the interviews, girls and women alike became more lively when they remembered themselves as part of a group of girls who were the aggressors. Their eyes lit up; they laughed as they thought about sharing in the chase.

In some schools the game is one of hostile competition, with tackling and jailing rather than smooches and tickles. For example, in one elementary school in Chicago they jailed a boy; in another elementary school in California they tried to force him into the girl's bathroom—a different kind of boundary violation than kissing! In several schools the object of the game was to touch the butt of the other person rather than to kiss them. This occurred both in lower income city schools and middle-class suburban schools.

Avery, eleven years old, described a game the other girls play on her playground:

Well, there was like a whole bunch of girls and one boy, and they were holding him down and they were like pulling at his clothes and stuff. [Was the boy upset? I asked.] He wasn't very upset. He was trying to get away. But he was, like, not laughing. But he wasn't really upset. He was, he's a popular boy, but he wasn't really upset, like helpless like that. He was just trying to get away because there was two boys and he got caught. It was nothing like he was being abused or something.

It is important for Avery to reassure me that they weren't really doing anything bad to the boy. She told me three or four times that he wasn't upset, which would mean, in her words, that he wasn't "helpless." I think that she means that as long as there was a "fight," it was still a game.

The idea of hostile competition is so ingrained that at Caitlyn's school, when a boy fell down and a girl helped him up, all the girls thought this was "weird":

One time he fell in the wood chips and she helped him up and everybody was, like, "Oh my gosh!" Why would you help a boy up? And it was like really weird.

When I asked why a girl wouldn't do something like that, she answered:

I just think they'd be really embarrassed, and I know that I really wouldn't want to be embarrassed, so I'd kind of stay away from boys.

What's so interesting is that obviously the girls are not staying away from boys merely because the boys are chasing them on the playground or they are definitionally the "enemy." To do something friendly with a boy would be seen by one's friends as having a romantic interest in him, an interest they would be teased about and that would set them apart from their boy-hating friends. This fear interferes with girls and boys becoming friends, learning from one another, and sharing interests. Here, ten-year-old Caitlyn described a friend, Terry, she had when she was younger:

He was so fun. He'd always think of these great ideas to do during recess and he was like a brain. . . . So I thought that it was just really great to have a friend that was a boy, you know? It was kind of different and nobody really had a friend that was a boy . . . and then in third grade everybody would make fun of me, and I was kind of like uncomfortable, and I didn't think it was good anymore. I thought it was really weird.

Children, for better or worse, socialize each other, making it uncomfortable for each other to have cross-gender contact unless it's in the form of a hostile competition or a sexualized game like chase and kiss. I say unfortunately because girls and boys could be so much more to each other, as Caitlyn said. This boy was a "brain" and would help her with math. "He wouldn't just say figure it out. He would actually explain it to you three or four times till you got it." But the other children made her feel "weird."

So when a game of chase isn't actually about hostile competition between the boys and the girls, it shows the other side of this dilemma: Girls do like boys and want to relate to them.

Maya, now eleven, remembered a first-grade game with a "designated kisser":

In first grade we used to play chase and kiss. . . . You would bring them to the fence and my friend Frances would kiss them. [Why Frances? I asked.] I don't know. She was just elected for that job. She didn't really mind.

At her current school the girls chase the boys but don't kiss them. They form a tight circle around a boy and the game is that he tries to escape from it.

To adults, kissing might be cute. But to children it is serious, grown-up stuff. Madeleine, the chatty six-year-old from Chicago, told me that her teacher announced to the class, "If she finds out that anybody is trying to kiss somebody, they will *literally* be sent to the principal's office and be suspended from school." She emphasized the word "literally" to let me know how serious her teacher is. This reminded me of six-year-old Jonathan Prevette in North Carolina, who made national news when he was suspended from school for kissing the girl next to him at lunch.

Madeleine's teacher doesn't sound so harsh when we consider what actually went on in her school. The kissing games got a little rough in this lower-middle-class Chicago neighborhood. As Madeleine described it:

Colette, Meagan, and Dara were playing with Pablo and chasing him around the park. They chased him and pushed him and he slid on the rocks facedown. I saw it and I told on them to the teacher. And then they lied and said they didn't do it. And then she [Dara] found out that I liked Pablo, and she told him she liked him too, just to get me mad. And he told her that he didn't like her anymore. . . . She gave me the biggest, ugliest, dirty look in the world.

This kissing part of the game was about who liked whom on the playground, and Dara, "when she liked Pablo, literally made them [Colette and Meagan] chase him, pull him back, and hold him" and then Colette and Meagan "made them [Dara and Pablo] kiss." Dara, according to Madeleine, was the boss of this game, rounding up friends to hold Pablo

down so the two of them could kiss. She would show Madeleine who "owned" Pablo! This example also presents girls in a more active role than we usually picture them in "chase and kiss." It isn't the only example like that.

On another "violent" playground, in a Vermont suburb, Grace remembered second-grade playground games where one of the boys she liked got pinned down

by several girls. So, like, I kissed him, but I didn't feel very happy about that, because it wasn't very fun to kiss someone who had been pinned down and who obviously did not want to be kissed. . . . It wasn't serious stuff, but I remember thinking, "He probably doesn't like that."

It is interesting to consider whether when girls chase the boys they feel a kind of sexual power. Are they living up to age-old images of women as seductresses, evil temptresses to be avoided? Miranda embraced such archetypal images.

Miranda, a white twelve-year-old from a middle-class suburban neighborhood, loves to play "Crazy Licking Ladies" on the playground. The boys dubbed the girls this wonderfully descriptive name. On their school playground outside of Boston, the girls run after the boys and lick them when they catch them. Though they make the game less sexual by calling it a licking game rather than a kissing game, they make it more sexual because the girls are now "ladies." By chasing the boys they are more grown-up than girls, like the wild Bacchae of ancient Greek myth who make boys their slaves.

Bacchae, witches, vampires, and licking ladies. Kissing is not always cute but can be an act of wild abandon for children, an act that threatens a girl's equilibrium by pushing her into an adult role she might not feel ready for. Miranda had a dream about vampires and kisses that she shared with me. A boy she had a crush on in school was a vampire in her dream.

It was gross. Well, I won't tell you the whole thing, but it was. I was a vampire and he was a vampire and . . . I said, Oh, who cares! I'll tell you the whole dream . . . But it was weird and it was true, but I made up the ending. And, um—first he was my brother. I had known him, like I was split up from him for a really long time, but I don't really know him, know him, like now I do. But I lived next door to him when I was a baby . . . and I had this dream where we were brother and sister and

he was just like this weird snake guy, and he came on like, and I'm like, I don't like remembering it. It was bad now that I know who he is, and I hate him so much. Well, sort of I do but, see, I don't like his personality, but he's cute. He's really cute.

The dream was about a boy she had known since infancy. Like girls and boys who play together from an early age, they were like brother and sister, a closeness manifested in the dream story. But things change. Now she hates him, she said, but doesn't really. You can hear in her voice how she feels two ways about him. She doesn't like his personality, but he's cute. She's known him since he was a child but now he's different, changed.

He kept on saying, "Kiss me. Kiss me," and I was like, "No, why?" And he was like this weird snake, cobra, vampire guy, and he kept on saying, like, "Kiss me, kiss me" and I'm like, "No, because I know that you're just going to bite me and you're going to kill me and whatnot," and then I wake up, woke up, and that was annoying.

There was also "this old lady and this old man who were, like, friends of ours, but not the snake, too" and they were "trying to save me from him because they saved themselves from him and 'cause he was a weird snake guy."

In Miranda's dream she is being seduced, but she resists. The boy who was a friend from childhood reappears as a person with a snake (as a sexual being with a penis, a Freudian might add), and in this way is now dangerous to her. As a child he was like a brother. But as a teen he is a weird, vampire snake. She is attracted to him (he's "cute"), but also repelled. Kissing him means the death of childhood, and she resists. There to help her resist are the old man and old lady (her parents, I presume) who she imagines have escaped him. Children rarely believe in their parents' sexuality, and in her dream she makes them old to insure their asexuality.

As a preadolescent dream, this is a nightmare. It both frightens and excites her. And it also marks kissing as a boundary between childhood and high school. This border is particularly salient for white suburban girls, where sexual knowledge is acquired in a step-by-step manner (e.g., first base, second base, third) as opposed to urban girls, who sometimes cross a boundary before they even get a chance to think about it. Where girls are protected by parents (symbolized by the old man and old woman in her dream who are her friends), she has time and space to resist.

Like the chase-and-kiss games, Miranda's dream pits girl against boy.

The idea of "girls against boys," which they re-enact in school for games, teams, and projects, confirms to children that the differences between boys and girls must be immense. Many adult women remember playing in cross-gender groups. Children today still do play in cross-gender groups. But something happens around the age of five that changes their "public" presentation of themselves and whom they can be friends with. Candace Feiring and Michael Lewis, developmental psychologists at the child development laboratories at Rutgers University, call it the "birthday party effect" because beginning around age five, only same-sex peers are invited to one's birthday party.

The public separation goes on throughout middle-class neighborhoods and schools, making cross-gender contact even more fraught with danger. It is a shame when children are made to feel embarrassed because their wish to play with someone of the other gender is interpreted as a sexual wish. It's also a shame that when children do wish to experiment with sexual girl-boy contact it can only be represented in the hostile disguise of chase and kiss. This means that from early on sex and cross-gender contact are connected with shame and hostility, and these fractures in cross-gender friendship carry over to adult cross-gender misunderstandings. When girls play with other girls, much of this hostile disguise is missing or projected onto the one who plays the "guy."

Practice Kissing

Practice kissing is altogether different from "chase and kiss." Practice kissing introduces girls to sexual desire in a safe and limited way. Furthermore, practicing on each other is usually seen by the girls doing it as practice for heterosexual romance, but the fact that it's girl to girl also brings up guilt and self-doubts. As I listened to girls and women describing these games it occurred to me that many if not all of them describe the "other girl" as more "into it" than themselves.

While practice kissing, as in the Marie Howe poem cited earlier, girls frequently role-play boy-girl kissing. While many stories involve girls kissing girls for "practice," a few of the stories involve boys. One girl taught her little brother how to "French" kiss: touching tongues. In fifth and sixth grades in a school in California, the girls and boys would pair up after school into girlfriend-and-boyfriend pairs, then kiss each other in the playground, timing each other with a stopwatch.

In another boy-girl scenario of a kissing game, Rachel, who grew up in

the Philadelphia area, remembered that a boy in the neighborhood, Josh, had a clubhouse, and to be a member you had to kiss the president, Josh himself.

Another practice kisser, Jeanine, took full responsibility for the kissing and the pleasure in her game with the son of her mother's best friend. Though she is a twenty-eight-year-old African-American woman today, she vividly remembered when her mother's friend would come over with her four children. She and the youngest son, who was Jeanine's age, would go off and kiss. At the beginning, they did it in front of the others, "like, 'Look what we can do. We can kiss.' But it was really innocent." Then, when they got a bit older, they would still go off by themselves. It "just didn't stop," she said.

We would sit in the closet and kiss. We really did. And we would just practice kissing, and it was just like we were six, seven, eight years old. Always kissing. I guess until just before adolescence, because right about that time we were, like, it got more meaningful. But at that time we would just kiss and we were, like, this is fun!

Jeanine and her friend probably knew that this was forbidden, since they hid in the closet. But she also didn't feel much guilt because it was "practicing" even though the practice lasted at least four years.

Most "practice kissing," however, takes place between girls. In a sense, that's what makes it "practice" instead of "real." Often girls kiss themselves (their own hands or a pillow) in the game, and this is a way they remain true to the idea that the kissing is just "practice." This is also a way they assure themselves that it is not lesbian practice. Leah played a game like this with a bunch of girls at a fifth-grade birthday party.

We all pretended we were going out on dates, and we'd take turns going into the closet, like by ourselves, but pretending like we were going into the closet with our dates. And pretending like making out with someone, either with a pillow or with something "pretend" that represented your date there with you. . . . And I remember somebody opened the door when Tara was in there, and she'd gotten very much into this game, and like she had her shirt off and all of us were like [makes shocked face]. It was really funny.

Why do many women remember the "other" girl getting "into it" more than she herself did? Is it too shameful to remember or simply to tell about the time when you were the one experiencing desire? Gina had a similar

memory, where for her the play was just "practice," but for the "other girl," it was more. There was a kiss that was more than a kiss.

I do recall that we would play make-out games, where you kind of pretend you're kissing, you know and you're hugging in the dark of the closet, you kiss necks. And you kind of pretend. Now this is something I never told my parents. A couple of times she did kind of get close to kissing me. And I thought, Well this is a little strange, but you know, she just did it for the make-out game. So she would play the boy or I would play the boy and we would do this. But I sensed already something different, but I thought, you know, Oh well, what the heck. Then one time, it meant more. It wasn't just a game for her. I really sensed that.

The feeling she described for herself was a "benign kind of interest." But it seemed as though her friend Kim felt something more. And then one time,

[w]e were sitting in the bedroom playing dolls, and out of the blue she laid one on me, you know. She kissed me. She leaned over on her bed and she just kissed me, very tenderly, very sweetly, and I thought, "Oh my!" And I don't even know if I at that time registered the word "lesbian," but I'm sure I did by then. "She's a lesbian. She likes me. She likes me, likes me. Yeah."

Gina sensed something different about her friend's kiss, something that crossed a boundary and made it real. When it was "just a game" for Gina and her friends, there was nothing personal and rarely the presence of desire. Her friend Kim made it personal and revealed herself to be a desiring individual, not desiring to learn more about sex and boys and kissing, but desire as in desiring someone sexually. Gina, however, felt a border was crossed and pulled back.

In contrast to Gina's "benign kind of interest," May and her friends were in it whole hog, together. For long periods of time they would do sensuality experiments on each other's backs and arms, especially on the backs of their hands, moving their fingers lightly around in circles "a hundred times" for the pleasure of it: "It just felt lovely!" she recalled. May remembered being alone with her best friend.

One time we wanted to know what kissing was like, so I remember I kissed her—we kissed each other.

If we stop her story here for a moment, we notice how she corrected herself. Maybe it actually is more accurate to say that they kissed each other, but if she hadn't changed her words, it would have been one of the only times in a narrative where a woman telling a story about her childhood sexual game made such a direct statement about kissing or doing something to another girl. Among the women and girls interviewed, desire is something hard for a woman, let alone a girl, to claim for herself, even amid the sensual pleasure May described. May recalled

thinking that was so bad. But, and that was it. It was like we were wondering, what was that? It was like in second grade or something . . . and I remember thinking that was bad, and again when I look back on it, it's like no big deal. But at the time . . . I think even then I was thinking it was two girls and that I had never kissed someone before, so even the notion of just sexuality in general. I don't know how I learned that as something that is sort of taboo or bad, but I remember thinking that back then.

I wonder how many other "first kisses" are actually kisses between girls. The idea that kisses are practice for adult "dating" makes these first kisses "not count" to us as adults. The women who remember them discount them in this way too: "no big deal." But for May, a real sensualist who loved to have her back rubbed and who would confess to her mother her love of masturbation, this kiss did mean something sexual. It was a big deal.

Karen, like others before her, claimed that "Ann and Jessica were the instigators" of the games she played in the basement of her friends' homes. But she also admitted that, in turn, she "would also instigate Lissy," the youngest of her friends. She began:

You know. Touching ourselves and pretending to kiss each other. We were never really kissing each other. That was taboo. . . . When we would pretend to kiss each other it would be like one of us would pretend to be the guy and somebody would pretend to be the girl.

They would kiss with one hand over their mouths and one hand on their own private parts. Karen said she felt some "sexual excitement. Yeah, I guess it was sexual excitement, and then maybe thinking, well, one day I'll have a boyfriend and do this for real, sort of feeling."

The game went on for several months, and so it became a stronger part of Karen's history than some of the games other girls play. Quite possibly, it

was the sexual excitement that she felt that made her timid about revealing the game. This truly was a "secret" game, in the sense that whenever parents "came downstairs [they] would stop what they were doing." And also in the sense that she never had talked about it until I asked her about it. It wasn't exactly "real" in the way children think of what is real, and yet from the way it was so hard for Karen to tell this story, I wonder if it was more than "just practicing."

Miranda, the twelve-year-old girl with the dream, told me:

Well, like I pretend to make out with my friends and stuff, but it's just, I just hug them and go "wa wa wa" [kissing noises]. I don't really kiss them. I mean, I kiss my friends but . . .

But with Miranda there's not much of a boundary between kissing when you're pretending to be a boyfriend and girlfriend and feeling close to her friends for real.

I also just, like, if we're wrestling and I find myself in a weird position, I just, "Oh, I love you!" and stuff like that.

What does she mean? Does she mean, for example, that when she pins her friend and finds herself on top of her, she just spontaneously says, "I love you"? Maybe. In that way, wrestling is an excuse for two girls to get close, and feel close, without actually making out themselves.

No other young girl told me about practice kissing. Madeleine, the chatty six-year-old from Chicago, reassured me that she would never play a game like that:

They were making me play this game. I don't know what it was. But they said that you had to kiss somebody. And I said, I don't really feel like playing, and then they told me I was chicken. And I said, I think it's really gross that you guys want to kiss somebody.

The game itself has an element of coercion, so that even the people who did want to be kissed could pretend as if they didn't.

Avery observed a game at a slumber party where the girls kissed each other but put their hands over their mouths; "That's sick!" she said. "We were too young to be doing that." She added, however, that the girls were having lots of fun.

Were these girls presenting me with the “good girl” perspective? The version they imagined their mothers would tell? They were some of the youngest girls, and thus perhaps did not have the distance from their stories they would need to place the games in a “childhood” context. No doubt they did feel uncomfortable, but only Avery sees two sides. It is “sick” and also a lot of fun, but not for her. For her it might have seemed too “real.”

What's Real?

There's an enormous variety in sexual interest in the elementary school years. And when a girl growing up has this interest, when she wants to know what kissing is all about, what it feels like to rub against another person, she is lucky if she can find a friend who will discover this with her and who won't make her feel “weird.”

But because American culture doesn't acknowledge the possibility of childhood sexuality, when children do this, it isn't called “kissing” or “sex.” It's called “practice” or “play.” And why? Because by calling it practice or play we make a space for it and give children some time to act in a way that does not label them or define them in a permanent manner. It's also called practice so that girls don't have to admit to the strong feelings of attraction they may feel for other girls, so they can “successfully” move on to boys in their teen years without worrying that they are gay. You might even say that we help to guarantee heterosexuality by allowing girls to dismiss these games.

In middle school and teen years girls can begin to talk about “real kisses” and “first kisses.” Are they not still practicing? Games like “Spin the Bottle” and “Seven Minutes in Heaven” bridge the gap between play and real. They initiate girls into the world of heterosexual and “real” kisses. These are not “secret” games. They are very public ways to prepare girls for “adult,” “real,” and heterosexual sex.

Chapter 3

Feminine Ideals: Make-up, Midriffs, and the Pleasures of Being Objectified

“One is not born a woman—one becomes one.”

—Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

Britney Spears's popular video for her hit song “Hit Me Baby One More Time” shows her in a schoolgirl uniform with a short plaid skirt and a white button-down shirt tied up to show her midriff. Little girls love this look; they love Britney. I was recently in the stereo component section of a superstore and noticed a girl not more than three staring up at a poster of the blonde and smiling Britney. When the mother came to get the little girl, she said, “Isn't she pretty?” “Yes, she is pretty,” said the mother. The little girl already senses the appeal and attraction of a Britney Spears, a cross between Barbie and her little sister, Skipper. The girl's mother gives her approval that Britney Spears is indeed pretty and to be admired.

American culture now knows the dangers of girls' excessive preoccupation with looking pretty (in terms of eating disorders and low self-esteem, not to mention the way such preoccupations draw girls away from mind- and skill-enhancing alternative endeavors). Generally, cultural critics agree that this “lookism” and excessive control over women's appearance by the media derives from a male power base that seeks to keep women infantilized, working to please men and spend money on products. Few have analyzed the appeal of these images for women and what aspects may reach women and girls in a less sexist way. These images may not only

be about giving pleasure to a male audience but about experiencing it themselves.

Just a few years ago, girls in the nineties liked to play Spice Girls. Dressing up like "Spices," girls put on high heels, tucked their shirts up high to bare their midriffs, and then put on music and danced. They danced for each other, and they took turns posing and dancing in front of a mirror to look at themselves being Spice Girls.

Serena, who is nine, told me she likes to play "rock stars" with her friends: "We do the belly button thingie." They tuck their T-shirts up so that their belly buttons show. Sometimes they do a kind of play, where they layer their clothes and "throw off pieces until we just had like a little tiny skirt, like something very little, and a little bra." Serena said playing this game made her feel "weird." Weird bad or weird excited? She didn't elaborate and I did not take the conversation in that direction with so young a person. It may be that a nine-year-old cannot distinguish between weird and sexually exciting, given the strangeness of these feelings for which children are given no names. It might have been exciting to be dressed up like a rock star, wearing sexy clothing and performing for one another. Or it might have made her feel guilty weird.

Mothers and fathers are in collusion with girls' self-objectification in so far as it means dressing up to look pretty. If you asked for their opinions, they probably wouldn't say that a Spice Girl or a Britney Spears is a good role model for a young girl. But they would approve of their daughters' dreams of stardom, wealth, and glamour, just as some feminist moms bemoan the fact that their daughters will only wear pink dresses while simultaneously understanding that it gives their daughters pleasure.

Girl power posters rarely show girls dressing up like the Spice Girls and prancing around with their midriffs showing, preferring instead to show girls doing science behind test tubes or girls on the soccer field celebrating a goal. The girls most prized by adults advocating "girl power" are not the ones who are "growing up too soon," as the media has put it, but those who are considered to be "natural."

But what is a "natural" girl? A lot of thought, resources, and planning go into creating the "natural" look. Teens and young women believe the "natural" look most closely matches what is real about the girl, what is inside of her, her very true, private self; that's why fashion magazines can use this look to sell clothing. Girls both want to be loved for who they truly are and to also aspire to a kind of beauty that is breathtaking, "natural," and unattainable.

The idea of a private self is one that we all share in Western society but becomes especially important to adolescents who hope to find, express, or hide their true selves. But even a true self is a presentation a girl makes to herself. For example, the diaries girls keep are active attempts to construct the self to an imagined reader. There is always an imagined audience to a secret diary, and maybe even an audience to the secret thoughts of a young girl, even if only in her head.

The idea of a natural (or true) self actually is anything but natural and springs from stereotypes used to control girls' behavior. Like the idea of modesty in the forties and fifties, "natural" is a term of control, one that the term "spice" seeks to overturn or rebel against.

But it's even more complicated than that. Today we might assume, as many feminists do, that makeup and heels are a male invention to make women objects for their viewing, to make them ridiculous and powerless. Regardless, many girls see these items as having special power. Why else would their mothers forbid their wearing them? Why else would highly made up, fashionable women get so much attention?

There was a time when the power of such artifice was acknowledged: the Middle Ages. Church fathers from medieval times on have argued that wearing makeup, dying hair, and donning fancy clothing are all wicked arts designed to seduce men. One church father, Clement of Alexandria, wrote that the woman who wears makeup and decorates herself in fine clothing both hides her soul and practices deceit; the real woman in this case is the one behind the makeup. Clement further elaborated that women who adorn themselves too much distract men and tempt them toward sin.

Feminists of the seventies and eighties agreed in part. They, like the church fathers, saw the artifices of makeup and clothing as degrading. But they saw this artifice as designed *by men* and *for men* to make women and girls into the objects of desire that would please men—not women—best. For them, women's power was in sisterhood, working against all the man-made aspects of being a woman; they celebrated as natural all that was deemed not male-influenced.

The outcome of feminism's attack on man-created fashion was support of the "natural girl." Today, even in the fashion industry, the natural girl is a much celebrated creation supported by parents. For decades mothers have fought with their daughters not to wear makeup too early, not to wear skirts too short or shirts too skimpy. My son's middle school has a policy that girls are not to wear tops with spaghetti straps, because if they do their

bra straps would show. These rules are applied equally to boys, who are not allowed to wear T-shirts with beer or drug advertisements on them. But the rules seem to be more of a burden on the girls, many of whose lives to some extent revolve around shopping and clothes when they leave school. Boys aren't that interested in beer- and drug-emblem shirts per se (even if they are interested in beer and drugs); but girls are the ones who have to make an effort to conscientiously adjust their wardrobe every morning and reject or manipulate the items they truly do want to wear. Through rules such as "no skirts or shorts that don't come down below your fingertips when your arms are at your side," the school unwittingly helps girls to see dressing to appear sexy, and even sexuality, as a form of resistance.

The rules, however, are dropped for concert nights, which is a spectacle in and of itself. When the mostly girl pop chorus, in cartoonlike high heels and wedged shoes, teeters up onto the movable stands to sing their tunes, these girls look absurdly glamorous. They are eleven- and twelve-year-olds in three-inch heels, with thick blue eye shadow, spaghetti straps and bra straps entwined, long and leggy with short black dresses. They are silly and adorable, sexy and marvelous all at once. They are good girls dressed up "bad" or "sexy" and they are playing dress-up to represent an image of a seductive grown-up woman that the culture has shown them, an image not reflected back by the mothers in the audience. By sexualizing themselves, they both differentiate themselves from their mothers and celebrate their objectification.

Before middle school, girls often "do girl-ness" by dressing in clothes considered feminine, choosing pink and lace. Laura, whose mother was a lesbian feminist, took karate and played cards and Legos with boys, yet she still longed for the pink and the lace. Growing up as she did she had fewer expectations of being a "girly" girl than most other girls who grew up in the sixties. But still she yearned for it. Her best friend, Prudence, lived in a wealthy, traditional family, with a maid and a country house that the family would go to on the weekends to escape New York City. To Laura, though, Prudence's mother embodied ideal femininity. She even wore white gloves! When they played the card game "Bullshit!" at Prudence's house, the girls had to be careful because they couldn't swear in front of Prudence's mother. Meanwhile, Laura could swear as much as she wanted to at home. Laura wanted nothing more than to have a pink polyester nightgown like Prudence's with lace on the collar and cuffs: "It represented normalcy to me . . . the Brady Bunch or whatever." When Laura's mother tried to respond to her budding sexuality by buying her a purple, lacy bra,

Laura "was horrified." Laura's mother was trying to make becoming a woman fun and sexual for Laura, but Laura wanted to be like all the other girls whose mothers were teaching them about modesty and decorum. She had absorbed social prescriptions for female behavior and, finding that her own mother didn't "fit," invested her fantasies with so-called "normal" visions of femininity.

Mothers teach daughters that if a girl presents the right kind of femininity, she will attract romantic interest and respect from boys and men. In the fifties and sixties, being taken care of in life was an important future goal. But in the seventies, eighties, and nineties, being a good girl was protection against being abused and raped. So mothers thought.

In aspiring to femininity girls are encouraged to seek power through their appearance and their manners. The ideal of femininity is pretty, nice, desirable, and popular. Truth be told, there really is power in this ideal, but it is a borrowed power, a granted power—granted by men who benefit most from girls' niceness. When girls are encouraged to seek power through their actions and accomplishments, something that the girl-power movement aims for, there usually follows an outcry that boys are being displaced. This response has already begun with Christina Hoff Sommers's new book, *The War Against Boys*, and the onslaught of boys' books (*Real Boys*, *Lost Boys*, *Raising Cain*) that seek to refocus our attention on boys after, it would seem, girls have had enough.

Ideals of femininity insure that girls will not be too sexual or too aggressive, staying away from areas presumed to belong to boys. They exert a control on girls that mothers and fathers enforce and that girls support in their rejection and exclusion of other girls for being too tough, rough, or wild. Nevertheless, girls resist this good girl ideal. While they are conforming to men's objectification of women they also could be resisting it.

Girls resist when they play lovely little games in high heels, stripteasing, flouncing, and jutting their chests out in great amusement. When they dress up with boas and heels and red lipstick, and put socks in their play bras, they are aspiring to be like sophisticated grown-up women and, at the same time, they know that they are exaggerating. They become caricatures of real women. They totally embrace and invest in the idea that a woman is constructed—constructed of pretty, sexy, and lacy things.

In their wholehearted belief in sexuality as power, girls resist the idea that they should be asexual, modest, and polite little girls. They are outrageous. They break the rules. Like men in drag, they play at being sexy and sexual, desired and ogled. They are their own best audiences and use mir-

rors to watch themselves be transformed into sexy grown-ups. In these mirrors they sense the power of the sexual. That's why these games are private and usually halt when a parent or other adult enters the room.

The Power of Being an Object: Stripteasers, Super Models, Spice Girls

"Did you ever play at being a sexy grown-up?" I asked the women and girls I interviewed. Most knew exactly what I meant. Sexy for some meant sophisticated. For others it meant being a star. For some it meant being a stripper or seductress. Many, many girls and women play and played dress up, choosing the sexiest of their mothers' clothing and imagining themselves as all sorts of slutty and glamorous women.

Joan Riviere, one of the early American female psychoanalysts, used the word "masquerade" to describe flashy women. She said that there is an inclination in women to flash their femininity to signal they are not really very threatening to men, that their power is a charade. The psychoanalytic literary theorist Jacques Lacan also understood the trappings of femininity as fetishism. The flashy costuming of womanhood, he believes, is meant to make up for what a woman lacks—a penis. Some modern psychoanalysts might interpret these girls' dress-up games in this way. They might see the costuming and feminine flashiness as a power display, but also as defensive: Girls are trying to make up for their lack of the greater social power that is granted to those with penises. But I don't think they would be telling the whole story. The power in these games is more than defensive. These girls are exhibitionists of a kind of power they see all around them, every day—the power of being an object.

There are two kinds of power in being an object. In one sense, the power is in the gaze of the other. In adulthood, many women yield such power to others by depending on their gaze and evaluation for their self-worth. But in another sense, when girls dress up and dance in front of a mirror, as they do, they also become the looker, the one with the eyes, the one desiring and approving of themselves. Their gaze can't be reduced to a male's gaze. To say that they look at themselves as they imagine a man would suggest that a woman can't look at herself as a sexual being without pretending to be a heterosexual man. It makes her sexuality only a gift derived from male attention.

The power one feels from being a subject of one's own desires and not

only the object of someone else's desires is more profound and upsetting than being an object for a boy or a man. It upsets the way things are supposed to be. In point of fact, women and girls are only supposed to feel sexy and sexual due to male attention. Finding oneself sexual feels unnatural, perverse. That's why girls hide this kind of response and are ashamed of it.

But isn't there something natural or, to use a better word, fundamentally human about wanting to be seductive? About wanting to be an object, taking oneself as an object? Like the infant who claps at herself and says 'Look at me!' Isn't there something delightful in painting one's face into something alluring or changing one's hair with the fashion? Brianna, a ten-year-old growing up in the Chicago suburbs, told me, "Sometimes I put on big black shoes with heels, and I say, 'Oh, look at me!! I'm Ginger Spice!' " And can't we adults respond to her in a way that acknowledges how lovely it is that she is not ashamed to say "Oh look at me!"

Couldn't we also ask why men deprive themselves of this pleasure? It wasn't until about two hundred years ago that there began to be a sharp differentiation in the way men and women dress. Men stopped dressing decoratively, with ruffles and plumes, while female clothes remained imaginative and fanciful. When I teach my gender issues in psychology class, I like to ask the men in the class if they ever feel deprived because of the colors and textures that women can wear? Do you ever want to wear feathers? I ask. Have you felt how nice a silk scarf is?

Girls who dress up are indeed acting out two-dimensional images of what a grown-up woman is, the striptease, the model, the ultrafeminine girl, the prostitute, but they do so with such energy and love and creativity that we can't deny the pure pleasure in being fancy and in being watched.

The adult women I interviewed spoke of these games with joy and openness. In contrast, many of the little girls I talked to seemed hesitant, unsure if this is a bad sort of game to play. Madeleine, who is only seven, described what other girls do: "They pretend they are taking off their clothes. . . . That's why they don't have any friends." Kelly, a ten-year-old, also was hesitant: "We get high-heeled shoes and then we get some skirts on and we just walk around." When asked how she feels when she does this, she replies, "Embarrassed. . . . Because she makes me do it. She's like p-l-e-a-s-e, can we play Spice Girls?" Although Kelly played this game, she others the desire. It is her friend who made her do it. She intuitively feels that the vamp is not a proper role.

Play that involves being a "bad" woman is exciting because it is play.

That which isn't permitted in real life can be enacted and enjoyed. Strippers and prostitutes and "sluts" are bad women. The girls might not know what they are called, but these images are present enough in the culture for these girls to notice and wonder about their power.

The beauty pageant is an acceptable form of striptease because their stripping (the swimsuit competition) is regulated. But Bethany's friend reworked the game so that the beauty pageant ran out of control. Her friend invented a new part of the game where the two girls would line up the chairs in her basement to represent the line of the judges, and then her friend would seductively go over to a chair and pretend to sit on the judge's lap doing sexual things to him and exposing parts of her body, so that the judge would vote for her. Bethany was always quite uncomfortable with how far her friend went with this game: "She would really get into it." Thus, even the game at being a "good" object of desire (beauty contestant) was turned into a "bad" object (slut).

Aidee, the seventeen-year-old tomboy who grew up part-time in the projects of New York and part-time in Puerto Rico, played at being a prostitute

once or twice with my friends. And we would dress up in like sexy clothes and pretend to be like not perverts, but like prostitutes. I don't know why. . . . It was fun because like we would laugh, like, "Yeah, give me a penny and I'll give you my body." But it was weird 'cause, like, I didn't know the meaning of what it was.

It is "weird" and she doesn't know why she played it. I asked if it made her feel powerful, and she said, "Yeah, cool."

Bad woman images are indeed inviting. In the sixth grade Marilyn took a walk down Bourbon Street in the city of New Orleans. There the strippers and prostitutes hung out on the streets, waving and smiling at the little girls. They had long feather boas and high heels. Their dresses were long and studded with thousands of sequins. Her mother said to her as they passed these women, "I want you to promise me you won't do that when you grow up." So, of course, said Marilyn, she used to pretend to be a stripper for hours at a time, prancing around her room with a boa and high heels.

Linda remembered a slumber party at age twelve where the greatest fun of the evening was a striptease show that each girl had to perform. Marilyn and Linda, both adults today, look back on these memories with

no shame and a lot of pleasure. This is because as an adult looking back, the meaning of these games is clear—it was about fun, pretend.

Many other women remembered the pleasure of dressing provocatively. Although May is an adult now, she remembered the luscious feeling of crossing a "boundary that you shouldn't" when she dressed up in lipstick and a miniskirt and walked around "acting sexual." One woman called it wearing "trashy" clothes. Another called it wearing "sexual, seductive clothes." As girls these women knew that "clothes make the woman." But they didn't yet know what kind of woman they would become; they were in the process of developing. Like girls today who mimic Spice Girls and Britney Spears, they had mixed feelings about who they wanted to turn out to be, but could play out these feelings in their games.

The child absorbed in play takes what she is doing utterly seriously, yet knows at the same time that it doesn't count. The grown-ups, who of course were children once, have for the most part lost or forgotten that serious aspect of their experience. They look back and say, "It was just play." The children know that it is not "just" play, that play affects your mind and soul and could send you in directions you don't want to go. It's great fun and it's totally serious.

These stories show that the way popular culture and sentiment get into the hearts and minds of little girls is not through direct force. Somewhere along the line, through the barrage of images, girls take over, regulating themselves and other girls according to certain ways of being a woman. The twin ideals of being a modest feminine girl and also a glamorous object aren't images that are forced down their throats by one monolithic media. If they are victims, they are willing victims. Girls play an active role in taking in these images, rearranging them somewhat, and creating new expectations for themselves. But while they obey the images and re-create them, they also undermine them. Herein lies the potential for becoming a sexual person, a sexual agent (not just a desired object) for all girls.

Chapter 4

Naked Barbies

"I was scared of Barbies. They were so sexual. . . . when I wanted to play Barbies it was like, let's get to the good stuff . . . and they had sex."

—Chrissie, white, 21

Though the namesake of Mattel Toys was a man named Matt Elliot, it was his wife, Ruth Handler, who masterminded the creation and marketing of its biggest seller: Barbie. She pushed the executives there to create the first Barbie doll. In Susan Stern's film *Barbie Nation: An Authorized Tour*, Handler remembers aloud why she wanted a Barbie doll. As a developing pre-teen, when her breasts began to show she had felt self-conscious, and would walk around stoop-shouldered. Handler wanted girls to be proud of how they look, not ashamed or embarrassed. Barbie was a doll with boobs and fantastic posture.

First advertised as a teenage fashion model, Barbie was made purposely bland in face and personality so that girls could project their grown-up longings onto her. She was modeled after a German "sex doll" (literally, a doll men could buy in sex shops) called Lilli. When Handler and her husband brought the model of Barbie to the factory workers, the men in the factory refused to do it; they said that there was no way they could make a doll with breasts. Sid Kahn, the marketing executive for Mattel at the time said, "I could not believe this doll was going to be marketed to kids." Marketing knew that mothers would hate Barbie, and so, using the new media, TV, Barbie was marketed directly to the children.

Barbie is sexually provocative. Everything about Barbie says, "Undress me," "fondle me." This is a little hard for me to admit, because as a feminist I don't want to be saying that the way a woman dresses has anything to do with what you can or can't do to her. One woman quoted in Mary Rogers's book *Barbie Culture* agrees, saying, "I think dolls shouldn't have that kind of body. It sometimes makes children do bad things to her." Imagine what it is like to be a six-year-old living in a presumably sexless society and to have in your hands every day a little woman whose breasts jut out at you, whose clothing fits so tightly you have to stretch the shirts over those firm, pointy breasts. Imagine the turn of her heel and, in the late fifties and sixties, what could only be called Barbie's "bedroom eyes." It has to be said: Barbie turned kids on.

Adult men too! In Barbie's early years, the 1960s, she was seen as a threat to men. In a 1964 issue of *The Nation* magazine, one man wrote, "Barbie threatens to make a generation of vipers that will cause men to plead for the return to monism." In 1965, in the magazine *Ramparts*, another man wrote, "Mattel wants little girls to realize the American feminine ideal, growing up to be a big-spending, busy, powerful, frigid woman." It's funny how the second author equates powerful with frigid, but both men see the downfall of womankind as existing in the power that the very sexual Barbie exudes. This is in keeping with thought from one hundred years ago that characterized the good woman as someone who will be ruled by the superior judgment of her husband. It's also ironic how today we ignore the sexuality of Barbie and only see her as an unattainably perfect body; we condemn Barbie for disempowering little girls, preoccupying them with concerns about their appearance.

Mary Rogers, also in the book *Barbie Culture*, calls Barbie a "fantastic icon" because she contributes to our lives by exaggerating what is "actual, possible, or conceivable." But for girls, what is conceivable is so much more than the Barbie figure. It is the possibility, or promise, of sexuality. Stephen Kline, in *Out of the Garden*, wrote that "Barbie was intentionally crafted to invoke a specific kind of imaginary role-playing that went beyond the mothering and family scripts that had until then defined doll play." This new script equaled a kind of power for girls not easily found in games of wife and mother.

One of my most fun experiences in interviewing women about their memories of sexual play and games was asking them if they ever played "naked Barbies." So many of them would react with shock and glee: "How could you know?" It was as if I were the omnipotent parent of childhood

whose knowing glare they couldn't escape. Only in my case, the delightful stories would follow.

For example, Laura had Barbie and Ken "humping": "We would put Ken on top of Barbie and there'd be a lot of heavy breathing." Grace strung her Barbie up naked in a game about children seeking revenge on an evil baby-sitter. Grace claimed that her Barbie game was more about straight humiliation than sexual humiliation. However, this opinion is hard to buy wholesale, for she did tie Barbie up naked.

In contrast, Leah's Barbie had an active sex life:

Every time my mom would open the door, Ken and Barbie would be naked . . . and we, it was like there was one Ken doll, and whenever you could, you would buy a Barbie. You always wanted to get the pretty Barbie. You didn't want to waste your money on Ken 'cause they all looked the same. So there was one Ken to go around. So, you know, Ken made it with a lot of Barbies, and we'd, like—we'd put them in the bedroom and we'd take off their clothes and roll them around on the bed and make little kissing sounds and stuff. . . . And I remember Barbie and Ken would make it on a horse (naked). . . . And the two of them were riding this horse naked, and I remember my Mom thinking [aloud], "Hmmmm. Should I be worried about this?"

Mothers did worry. Abbie's mother, for example, like many modern-day mothers, wouldn't allow her to play with Barbies. Whenever she went to her friend Mary Jane's house, the two of them would take out the Barbies:

Yeah, we enacted a lot of sex with the Barbie dolls. Mary Jane taught me what "69" meant when we were in seventh grade. We did that with Barbie dolls. We were still playing with Barbie dolls then. You know. Ken and Barbie would copulate.

When children played naked Barbies together, the sexual aspects took on a more daring and mutually delightful quality. Alone, children wondered, once again, whether they were normal. Caroline's first confession as a Catholic involved Barbie. Her Barbie and Ken play was no different from many other girls'. She stripped her Barbie and Ken, put them next to each other, and made kissing noises. However, this was around the time when she was supposed to make her first confession, right around age seven.

It was my first confession, in a dark church in the sixties, and, you know, I said, "I committed adultery." And the priest was, I don't know if he thought I was being a smart aleck or what, but he got really angry with me. . . . He repeated the word, "You committed adultery? What do you mean? What are you talking about?" . . . At the time I didn't, I thought it was such a horrible sin that he . . . And he got really mad, and it just scared me so much. . . . I ran out of that confessional and it was years before I got back.

In most Barbie and Ken play, there is an element of practicing for dates. The TV commercials originally encouraged this kind of play as well, labeling some of Barbie's outfits as outfits for a "date" and suggesting that Barbie had a date with Ken that night. Although some girls borrowed their brothers' GI Joes, most used Ken for what he was created for, Barbie's date.

Having Barbie and Ken date was a very safe way to play at being a heterosexual teenager. When girls practiced kissing with each other instead of Barbies, problems could arise. Sometimes one girl got more "into it" than the other. Sometimes a girl actually would get stimulated by kissing another girl. There was always the worry that if this happened, then the two girls weren't really "practicing," they were experiencing, and if they were experiencing, then they might be lesbians.

Psychologists who do play therapy with children know the usefulness of doll play as a form of distancing. When children have strong emotions, sometimes it is too difficult for them to express the emotions directly, so the therapist, through doll play, can watch how the dolls interact and what they do and say as a clue to the unconscious or hidden feelings of the child. As the child attributes these feelings to the doll, she or he doesn't have to own them as her or his own. Also, when children don't have the words yet for how they are feeling, doll play can help them enact that which they can't express. In both ways, Barbie dolls help girls express what they don't have words for yet, chiefly their sexual interest, which helps them to distance themselves from it at the same time. They can remain good girls while Barbie is the slut.

The practice for dating isn't the only way Barbies introduce girls to heterosexuality. I noticed that in all of the stories about Ken and Barbie and their antics, Ken was always on top of Barbie. Did they pick this out from TV programs or from romantic book covers? Did they translate their romantic fantasies of being swept away into the sexual activities of Barbie

and Ken? Did Ken hold for them the idea of sexual longing while Barbie became the passive beautiful object? Was Ken always the initiator, or did Barbie's outfits, in some not so subtle way, tell Ken that she wanted to "get naked?"

Erica Rand, in her book *Barbie's Queer Accessories*, points out the irony that Barbie is a female doll that excites girls. Girls dress and undress her, "fondle and obsess" over her. They show no real interest in Ken's body. Granted, Ken has no genitalia, but from early on, girls learn to sexualize the adult female body. Do they translate that to their own bodies? Or do they come to see other women as sexual bodies, sexual beings, as they get older? In Rand's view, Barbie play promotes girls' sexual feelings toward other girls.

Whether or not Barbies encourage lesbian feelings may depend on how girls feel about who they are when they are playing Barbies. Who is the subject of the desire? If they feel excitement, and they feel it as though they are the Barbie dating Ken, then, in a sense, they embody the heterosexual fantasy. If they feel the excitement in the handling and dressing of the Barbie, if they acknowledge it in themselves, we can't deny it is a woman-to-woman kind of excitement.

It is not so hard for heterosexual women to imagine that they could have been gay. Many older heterosexual women say jokingly to their friends that when their husbands are dead, they'll go off and live with them in an all-women's house. Many teen girls will tell each other that they love each other, sometimes adding, "Don't think I'm a lesbian." Little girls hold hands and kiss their girlfriends on the lips. Adrienne Rich, over thirty years ago, said these acts exist on what she called the "lesbian continuum." She tried to remove from the idea of "lesbian" the notion of it only meaning women having sex with other women, and tried to broaden the idea to include women loving other women in a variety of ways.

A number of psychoanalytic theorists suggest that everyone's first love story is with their mother, whether you are female or male. The richness of girls' connections to other girls, some have argued, comes from the fact that they are nurtured and cared for by a woman in their early years. Some pop psychologists go further by arguing that women are disappointed with their husbands (in heterosexual relationships) because they expect their husband to be more like their first love, their mother—more like a woman. In my teaching of young adult women about gender and sexuality, many have confessed that they are attracted to "sexy" adult women. Some interpret this as a sign of their bisexuality; some see this as the end product of being taught by the culture to respond to stereotyped images of what is "sexy."

If Barbie represents to young girls the possibilities of their bodies, then ambivalence will most certainly come out. Researchers and journalists have paid a lot of critical attention to Barbie and her looks. The problems they see are related to her large breasts, her small waist, and the fact that she always walks around on tiptoes. Blonde, white Barbies are the most popular items among a wide variety of dolls. The "multicultural Barbies" or "ethnic Barbies," when they first came out, simply looked like white Barbie with brown skin.

Mary Rogers has argued in *Barbie Culture* that Barbie takes the stuff that most girls become preoccupied with (being nice, having an attractive body) and turns it into fun, glamour, and excitement. Stories of Barbie "torture" on the other hand, suggest the limits of such play, as well as girls' ambivalence toward what Barbie stands for. One girl humiliated the naked Barbie baby-sitter. Another rubbed Vaseline on her Barbies' vaginas and tortured them in what she created and called a "zombie chamber" (not the "barbie dreamhouse"). A Catholic girl from Indiana played a game with her best friend in which they tied up Barbie and pretended to pluck her pubic hairs out, one by one. The torturing of Barbies expresses fear, hostility, and anger, which we'll say more about in the chapter on anxiety about bodily changes. However, if doll play expresses unconscious feelings, we can safely assume that girls did not simply want to grow up and look like Barbie. They resisted such transformation as well.

Zeroing In On: Childhood Innocence and the Shaming of Sexuality

When the Grimm brothers rewrote the fairy tales they had collected, although they acknowledged some of the eroticism and aggression of children that occur in many of these stories, they cleaned up others. Sleeping Beauty, in earlier versions, gave birth to twins, whereas today we know her only to have been kissed. Marianne Warner, the English essayist who analyzes this and other fairy tales and myths brilliantly, states that "the belief that there's a proper childlike way for children to be has deep roots" and warns that the way we treat children "really tests who we are, fundamentally conveys who we hope to be." There is an expectation that children should be innocent, and that girls especially should be innocent of sexuality.

The Puritans thought that children went astray as soon as they were born. One New England preacher in 1689 claimed Satan got them to be "proud, profane, reviling, and revengeful as young as they are." In the eighteenth century, although there was a fight to show that the newborn child was born innocent, the philosopher Locke noted that in addition to their love of freedom, children also loved power and domination, and that these two traits showed themselves very early. Romanticism and its desire to discover the lost paradise of childhood innocence had a huge influence on our understanding of childhood as we see it today. Children were seen as closer to nature, and in that closeness, girls were seen as quite sexual and in need of education for modesty. The Victorians made rules about sexuality that were antisensual, placing reason over emotion. And the modern

citizens of the twentieth century strove to undo the hypocrisy of Victorian times by speaking openly about what they believed had been repressed earlier.

Freud's so-called "discovery" of childhood sexuality in the early twentieth century shocked his contemporaries and revolutionized the way we see children today. He argued that children experience sexual pleasure throughout their body and throughout their early years. That children, and for that matter, all of us, have sexual and aggressive feelings that are both natural and unacceptable to us is basic Freud.

Anti-Freudians place the seat of sexuality as outside the child and see adults as corrupting influences. At the turn of the twentieth century, parents were warned about governesses who oversexualized children and taught them to masturbate. In the 1920s parents were warned about overstimulating their children themselves. In the 1980s and 1990s parents continued to be warned about the pedophile. Also, in the last few years, parents and professionals alike see children's sexual expression as a direct result of media images that sexualize them unnaturally.

Children are well aware of our expectations about their innocence. One of the college students I interviewed said it well:

We were supposed to be playing with our dolls. We weren't supposed to be knowing that you could have sex with boys. We were in third grade.

Another girl felt all alone in the world because she thought often about sex. It was constantly on her mind, but she was confused about those feelings, felt guilty about them: "It never occurred to me that anyone else would be thinking about those feelings."

Patty, an adult who grew up in an Irish Catholic household, also had sexual feelings, and remembered playing with herself in bed at night when she was young, until one night her mother discovered her and said, "Don't do that!" Another woman discovered sexual feelings rolling around on a hassock. When her mother saw her, she said, "Good girls don't do that." A Puerto Rican woman who grew up in New York in the 1960s kissed a boy and got punished for it.

Researchers still know very little about children's sexuality. The famous sex researcher Alfred Kinsey, despite his many other discoveries about human sexuality, did not notice that girls play erotic games with each other. More recently, researchers have taken to asking parents (!) about the sexual lives of their children (rather than asking the children

themselves—or asking adults about their own childhoods). In a study of Irish parents, about 36 percent answered that their children had had some form of sexual play with each other, while only 3 percent actually had seen their children simulate intercourse by lying on top of each other. Reporting of explicit sexual behaviors was unusual, but then, this would be difficult for a parent to see. In another study, William Friedrich, a professor of psychology at the Mayo Clinic, and his colleagues gave questionnaires to over eight hundred middle-class mothers. They found that about 38 percent had caught their children engaging in some kind of sex play. Only 8 percent had seen their children or knew that their children had engaged in some sexual touching (direct genital contact).

But there's more. In their book *Sexual Abuse and Consensual Sex: Women's Developmental Patterns and Outcomes*, Gail Wyatt and her colleagues at UCLA count about one in five children as engaging in some sexual play in childhood but write that there is no adequate information about ethnic differences in childhood sexual practices. In the early 1990s they conducted a major survey and interview to learn more about the sexual experiences of African-American girls and women compared to white girls and women. Because they were interested in all kinds of experiences, they did not look very carefully at children's games and lumped together in their analysis all kinds of childhood sexual experiences, from the mutually delightful to the uncomfortable harassment, as well as social and individual masturbation. They found that childhood and adolescent sexual involvement was unrelated to adult psychological well-being. They did find quite a bit of sexual experience in the lives of children.

These researchers and others have found that sexual activities do not decline in the latency years, ages six to eleven, as Freud had suggested. Instead, sexual activities continue with increasing frequency. Mutual sex play is common among children, and in most studies it's the atmosphere of the home that determines how this sex play is perceived by parents and children. In these studies and others, even those investigating abusive adult-child sex, it is the blaming and the repressive atmosphere in the home that contribute to long-term feelings of guilt.

The only place where we find a lot of information about girls and sex is in anthropology research. Anthropologists have learned that children can have orgasms and that some parents stimulate the genitals to please or pacify a young child. In some Muslim and American Indian cultures, boys are allowed sexual play and intercourse in childhood. In Melanesia, while boys and girls can play naked with one another, they cannot touch each

other. In contrast, boys *are* allowed to play sexually together. In some cultures on the Hawaiian Islands, girls would have their vaginal areas rubbed with coconut oil and their labia and clitoris stretched orally by their aunts to make them more beautiful. Despite the sexual overtones some westerners might read into this, neither the adults nor the children perceived it as sexual. Furthermore, the girls enjoyed it. Sexual exploration among children was encouraged however, and children often observed adults having sex.

Even in the anthropological literature, not all things are equal. Boys' sex education seems to take precedence over girls in that most anthropologists writing about sexuality were much more interested in occurrences of intercourse rather than sexual play. Thus there is a bias in their writing, reflecting their own ideas of what is a topic of sexuality worth writing about and what questions are worth asking a resident of a culture. Most anthropologists occupied themselves with studying sexual initiations and rites of passage, obscuring the practices that go on among children by not seeing children as full participants in a culture.

In the United States a wide range of evidence suggests that sexual freedom has its good points. Unfortunately, we tend to ignore it and harp on the harmfulness of the media in portraying sexuality to kids. In families where children and parents are less self-conscious of being nude in front of one another, children grow up to have better body images. Conversely, we know that sexual perpetrators are sorely lacking in sex education, often getting most of it from pornography or their own prior abuse.

Sweden is the first country to require a comprehensive sex education program that starts in elementary school. In Scandinavia and much of Europe, the idea that sex in itself could be harmful to children is absent. Children's right to sexual play and games as well as sexual freedom is recognized in Scandinavian countries, and the practice of lovemaking is even taught. These are countries that, by the way, do much better than our own in preventing and recognizing abuse as well as keeping rates of abortion and venereal disease low.

Shame

While sex can be a source of energy and creativity, it can also, especially in the United States, be a source of shame. In a culture where children are supposed to be innocent and girls are supposed to be good, where sex is

considered bad or dirty, girls are not allowed to have sexual feelings. Sexual shame is what drives girls to do such things in closets and behind closed doors.

In a society where play is for children and sex is for adults, what happens when the two meet? Sex becomes the province of the Other. Diana Gittins writes in *The Child in Question* that the “bad child . . . has tended to be played down and/or denied at the same time as it is projected outside, located elsewhere, in others and in the Other.” While the intense interest of (usually Western) anthropologists in the sexual lives of children has furthered common understanding of children’s lives and culture, it has served to displace that youthful sexuality from the West to the Other, the so-called “native” peoples, thereby demonizing it. It is high time to claim this sexuality as common to all of us—and nothing to be ashamed of.

Chapter 5

Bodies and Pleasure: If It Feels Good, Why Is It So Bad?

“And that is how we became ‘best vagina pals!’ instead of ‘bosom buddies.’ ”

—Abbie, white, 42

Sexually pleasurable feelings are a part of some of the games girls play—games that are specifically about sex, games that are sexy, and games that arouse and excite. Adult women looking back over their childhoods think these games were great fun at the time. But even when they seemed fun and natural, they still often worry about certain aspects. Sometimes they worry whether they might have hurt another child, a younger one, by playing these games with them. Other times they wonder about a specific game of torture or “evil” involving sex—was this normal? Sometimes they worry about whether they were lesbians. They search for normal.

But the idea of normal is constantly shifting. Even anthropologists, who’ve seen and read about a wider range of human experience than most of us, were blown away in the late 1970s when anthropologist Gilbert Herdt returned from his stay with a New Guinea tribe which he called the Sambia. He shocked the academic world with the reports he brought back of male sexual initiation and development in this culture. While there he learned that little boys ages seven to ten were taken from their mothers and put through a ritual that lasted ten to fifteen years, a ritual in which they performed oral sex on the older boys of the tribe on a daily basis and then became the older boys upon whom oral sex was performed by the

younger males. They were called "Guardians of the Flute," and the men of this tribe believed that swallowing semen created biological maleness and maintained masculinity. After their "teen" years these boys rejoined the community, married, and became "bisexual" until they had children. Then all homosexual activity stopped. This ritual shocked the West simply because it showed a culture in which homosexual practices involving children had been normalized; furthermore, it showed that the practice of such acts didn't necessarily make a young boy homosexual for life.

In contrast, American girls' sexual play is not at all acceptable or part of regular public life for girls. Nevertheless, they like to "practice" with each other, play with each other in sexual ways, and find some sexual pleasure in their games. Though this differentiates them from the Sambian boys, like them most of these girls do not go on to conclude that such play makes them gay. In point of fact, while some of the grown women I interviewed are presently or had been at some point in their lives lesbians, they were no more likely than heterosexual women to have played girl-to-girl sexual games as a child.

In cultures where children are allowed to be sexual, there is still often a differentiation between child and adult sex and a differentiation by gender, too. For example, an anthropologist studying Hawaiian cultures was amazed to see that the part of the vaginal area called the mons is rubbed regularly with coconut oil by the girls' mothers or aunts. These women and those on other islands also pull at the labia of girls with their fingers and mouths to make the lips of their vaginas longer. They massage and knead girls' butts to make them rounder and more attractive. Although this culture may no longer carry out such practices after missionaries proselytized against them, sexual exploration between children during this time was encouraged, and at puberty a child was expected to be skilled sexually. There was even a word for the child's orgasm, which translates into either "joy" or "fun."

In Africa, among the Baganda, an anthropologist, to his embarrassment, observed girls playing a game of pulling at each other's clitorises to lengthen them. The girls experience sexual pleasure in such games, and adult women claim great benefits from such practice.

There is something about this cultural practice that seems refreshingly pro-women. Lately there has been a lot of media interest in the practice of clitoridectomy in Africa, a practice in which the clitoris of a girl, either the hood or the whole thing, is cut off in a terrifying ritual. Many feminists and anthropologists have made the case that this only happens in cultures that also show hatred for women in other ways, and that this practice serves to

keep women in line, taking away her pleasure at intercourse. With the Baganda, however, the opposite is encouraged: The clitoris is enhanced, teaching young girls about this pleasure center of their bodies. It is interesting, and perhaps significant, that there has been little media interest in such practices.

When I wrote the word "mons" a couple of paragraphs back, it gave me pause. I used that word because that was the word used in the book where I read about this practice, but what exactly is this place and will my readers know about it? To further complicate an investigation of girls' sexual lives, we simply don't talk about these different parts of the vaginal area. Most young girls in our own culture don't even know what a clitoris is, let alone the name for it. What might this say about our capacity for pleasure?

The stories that follow are about pleasure, the way girls teach each other that sex can be fun and erotic, but also about the shame and guilt that unfortunately go along with these pleasurable experiences. Sexual games make girls feel like sexual beings. They involve moments when girls can share the wonder and mischievous fun of playing around with sex. Sadly, in bringing pleasure to young girls, the games also bring out a lot of anxiety.

Marilyn was one of those women who seemed to have had a lot of sexual fun in childhood. At forty-five, she recalled how she and her friends discovered and shared erotic secrets. At "an early age," she and her friend Randi, she remembered, discussed how each of them had "rubbed their bottoms," and then confided in one another, "That feels good, doesn't it?" Then they went on to talk about other things. Marilyn also recalled that once she saw her cousin stimulate herself by leaning

against the little table where we did art. It came at just the practical level for her and we [the other girls] noticed it, and we said, "Oh, this is how I do it" and then we all proceeded to lie on the floor and show her our various styles. And it was the time my mother walked in and we all stopped, but we were embarrassed and she understood that, and she just said, you know, "Don't do anything that embarrasses you," and left.

Abbie, a white middle-class girl from outside of New York City, also felt sexual pleasure as a child and was able to talk about it:

I think I got excited with my "best vagina pal," Renee Segal. At the time I learned the phrase "best bosom friends" and Renee and I decided that

we were "best vagina pals" . . . and the main thing I remember in connection to that is that we used to go to the beach and we used to create sort of sand sculptures by pressing a lot of sand into our crotch with our legs spread out so that we could make a kind of a mound that represented our genitals somehow, and that is how we became "best vagina pals." [Was this sexually stimulating?] I think I got sexually excited. . . . What else could we have been doing? Just like shoving sand into our crotches. My God!

Abbie also played a game at summer camp with a little girl she adored: "I thought she was beautiful and I wanted to touch her":

We would pretend that we were Greek goddesses and I would call her Dernida, and I can't remember what she would call me, but I would just sort of jump on her, and the goal was to get both of our shirts off and to like lie on top of her and kiss her and embrace her with no shirts on. And I was definitely the leader. She was always wanting me to cut it out and never do it again, and I was always wanting to do it again, but she also enjoyed it. I think she felt guilty and bad and wanted me to stop initiating this thing.

This game was quite sexually arousing to Abbie: "Well, we kissed, you know? And then I'd lay on top of her with our naked chests. I don't think we got into our pants." Abbie was one of the few women who admitted to initiating a game like this. Like the others she worried about the fact that she enjoyed it.

Well, at the time I felt that this was a very exhilarating thing to be doing. And yet I could see her point, that this was maybe not quite the right thing to be doing spending our time at camp. I needed to distance myself from the lesbian aspect and not the sexual aspect is what I remember.

For other girls, these kinds of games were thrilling or "exhilarating" too, but even more secret. Devin, a twenty-year-old student, remembered having sleepovers with her cousin who was the same age. They'd see each other about twice a year and sleep together in a big double bed, "for convenience's sake."

And I remember when at night they'd put us to bed, and I think this was when I was very young, like between the ages of six and ten. . . . I re-

member this is kind of weird. I don't know what, why we did what we did or what it meant. I think it was just curious, curious about sex and, just, you know, our sexuality. And we didn't even know that it was or didn't realize that it was; we were both females. That didn't really matter to us. We'd sleep back to back, you know so our bottoms would touch. And we found that very exciting. And at the time we didn't talk about it either. I don't know how, I don't know how we initiated it, or I don't remember the details, but I remember it being dark and us being sneaky and you know, sleeping with our butts touching. . . . It was something with our bottoms! It was very thrilling! Even now we don't talk about it, but I'm fairly sure she would remember it.

Devin took a long time to get to her confession of this small but exciting sexual act. Is it so small? To a child, it is an enormously sneaky and guilty pleasure. And until she told me, she had never told anyone about it: "Maybe the lasting feeling of naughtiness has carried over. I still feel that way when I think about it." This must have been a powerful sexual feeling for a child if the guilt and pleasure are so tangible years later as she speaks about it for the first time out loud.

Another girl reminded me of Devin. This was Marissa, an African-American college student, who grew up on the West Coast in a very religious family. The family would pray together before breakfast every morning. Marissa was a "good girl," in her own words, and even belonged to a club of good little girls affiliated with the church called "Glory Girls" who on their thirteenth birthday would wear a crown, dress in white, and walk down a ceremonial aisle to receive a rose. Although Marissa was good, she did one small sexual thing that had a lasting effect. Like Devin, this occurred during sleepovers with a cousin:

We were doing nothing, and like we were in my room, and then I turned off the lights and we were supposed to go to bed, and for some reason or other we both like felt the urge to like take off our clothes. And we were just sitting there. And I like just prayed that she wouldn't tell her parents, you know what I mean? 'Cause then like they probably would tell my parents, and I'm like a year older than her so I like felt responsible, and I was so afraid that after she left my house that like my parents would find out.

As I tried in the interview to find out what exactly she felt guilty about, it emerged that it is only the guilty pleasure of sitting naked next to someone.

For some reason or other, like I don't even remember what happened, but like I felt so responsible. I almost felt I'm the one who initiated. I'm not sure . . . I think it was pretty out of character for me . . . and I felt guilty for a long time, and I was like scared for a couple of years that my parents would find out.

Scared for a couple of years? The guilt over such a small act as this or Devin's rubbing of bottoms seems extraordinary. But if you imagine that the thrill was also incredibly big, like the excitement of crossing a boundary into the unknown world of sexuality expressed by so many little girls, it makes more sense. As one adult woman remembered about camp, a girl yelled out, "Let's have an orgy!" and all the girls fell upon one another kissing!

This wild exuberance seems to be more possible when there is a whole group of girls. Today's gender psychologists are fond of saying how wild boys are when they get together, that boys like to hang out in groups (they run in packs!), and that when boys get together in a group they give themselves permission to lose control. By saying this only about boys, though, they reinforce the stereotype that girls are always good, no matter what the social situation. But girls, when in groups, also egg each other on to do things they might never do alone or in a pair. Abbie remembered one night:

I went to this slumber party where the girl lived next to a graveyard, and we went in the graveyard and played truth or dare. And it was very sexy. And we had to do things like take off our underpants and sit on—straddle—the gravestones and stuff like that . . . there was some kissing of each other and taking off clothing. Mostly I remember that the most outrageous thing was having to straddle these gravestones with no pants on. No underwear on. . . . It was great fun, and I felt guilty. . . . It was very, you know, intoxicating . . . very arousing. I didn't know what it really meant at the time, but I know I was very excited.

What many of these girls who played these games with sexual excitement didn't know, was that other girls were also playing these games. Over and over I heard from adult women remembering back, "We knew we weren't supposed to be doing this stage yet" or "We knew we weren't supposed to know this yet" and "I was always pretty much the good girl." And then sometimes, they recalled, they would find out that someone else had

done the same thing. In eighth grade, Heather, who in a game had had long kisses with a girlfriend, later exchanged secrets with another friend who told her about her own games, and Heather exclaimed, "I did the exact same thing!" Heather told me, "As soon as someone told me that, it was fine, it was like over." The guilt had evaporated, and with it the worry that she was different and weird.

Who would deny children these small sexual thrills? Unfortunately many people would, thinking that bottoms should stay covered, that cousins shouldn't touch, that girls shouldn't experience pleasure with each other, and that children should ignore sexual feelings rather than pursue them. With all these shouldn'ts, it is understandable why Devin felt guilty and Marissa worried for years about her small act. Rather than worrying about children becoming too sexual too soon, we might instead turn our attention to the burden of guilt our expectations place on these very good girls and on how we might be teaching them that sexual pleasure is wrong or bad. How will we then unteach this guilt later? And if we do try, can we?

Chapter 6

Playing Dead but Feeling Tingly

"Just ignore it and it will go away."

—A mother

Not all the girls were able to feel the wild exuberance of Abbie, who straddled tombstones in the moonlight with her friends. Girls like Marissa and Devin had to pretend they weren't doing anything to allow sexual feelings and play to emerge: the exquisite torture of only putting your butt against another girl's, of *only* sitting naked next to her. This form of play was taken to its extreme in games where, in the game plan, girls needed to play dead or remain totally still to add to the feeling of danger and thrill while other children did the dirty work.

In some ways these games interested me most because they point out the contradiction in girls' lives. Girls want to be desiring individuals, they have desires, but to own these desires, to make them their own, makes them feel slutty or unnatural or unfeminine. It makes them bad girls. These games, then, like many group games, take away the responsibility of the individual girl. She can lie there passive, unrequesting, with no desire, perfectly still, like Sleeping Beauty, yet anticipating and experiencing the secret excitement and thrill of sexual feeling.

Dorothy Jean and her cousins had a game called "Playing Dead," where one girl would be posed seductively and scantily dressed as the murder victim, and the other girls would enter the room one by one as spectators, commenting on how beautiful she was. It was always wonderful for

Playing Dead but Feeling Tingly

Dorothy Jean to play the part of the dead woman, and the sexual thrill would come when an onlooker would say "Oh, isn't she beautiful." But to be beautiful and, more importantly, to be sexual, she would have to be dead.

Leah remembered a game she didn't want her parents to find out about that she played with her sister, Sherry, and two boys. Her dad's friend would bring over his two sons when he visited to play with Leah and her sister, and the four of them would play "The Skeleton Game."

The skeleton was the bad guy, and he lived in Castle Grey Skull or something, and we used to pretend . . . we pretended we were like prisoners of his and that he had this machine that hooked up to our private parts, and we would be giggling a lot, and then our parents would come in and we would pretend to be asleep.

Using strings and toys, the victims would lie still as his or her genitals were tortured or stimulated. Like "playing dead," this game conveys the message that sexual feeling is something forced upon you rather than something you might actively pursue.

"Playing doctor," one of the most common images of childhood sexual experimentation, incorporates the role of the passive "victim." In Connie's experience, growing up in Chicago in the sixties, "playing doctor" required total stillness of the patient. I was the first person Connie had ever told about her doctor game, and she felt quite guilty about it. Where Connie lived, all the girls on the street played together, almost every day after school and on the weekends.

We started playing doctor with each other, but with only the girls in the basement, like behind this built-in bar we had. Mom and Dad never knew about it . . . we didn't realize what we were doing. It got us aroused, I can remember it happening. . . . But we didn't know what was going on or why we were feeling that way. We had to go to the bathroom when we were finished. "I've got to go to the bathroom now," and so each girl would have their turn.

It would happen every time the girls in the neighborhood got together, and they played it "quite often" over a period of two years. One girl would take a turn as the patient and lie naked as the other girls would explore her body, touching, rubbing, and poking. Connie speculates that as they got

older, maybe this game was part of the reason why they didn't remain friends.

Looking back, I'm thinking, well, I don't know how those girls feel about it, and I kind of feel guilty that maybe we shouldn't have been doing that, and the older I got, I thought, and then you learn about lesbianism and, well, maybe we were. And I'm not a lesbian, but why did we do those things? What possessed us to do those things?

As I talked further with Connie she said that she thinks all of them were experiencing orgasms too, but

we didn't know what we were feeling because it was our first experiences with that. [And when they went to the bathroom afterward it was as though they thought] "Okay, I'm satisfied. I can leave now."

These games of pleasure mimic adult female sexual experience in many ways. It's not that these girls think they know what adult sex is and copy it—the woman lies still while the man does the work? It would have been rare for any of them to have seen sex portrayed in so stark and strange a way. Their doctor game instead shows a more implicit understanding of the role women are supposed to play sexually. They understand this from everything they are taught about being a woman and a "lady" in spite of all the progress women have made vis-à-vis these sex roles in society.

Sexual Feelings Are Good Feelings

Why are we so uncomfortable with the thought that our children have sexual feelings? So much so that our daughters have to play dead to experience them? Recently a mother told me that when her son was six, she and he were watching a sexy scene in a movie, when he said, "Look, Mom. My penis is sticking up!" She said embarrassedly, "That's nice. Just ignore it and it will go away." This same message is given implicitly to girls. Implicit because it is the unusual girl who asks about physical sensations she has around her vaginal area.

A particular instance of such a discussion stands out in my memory. I supervise college students who work at a residential home for out-of-control children. Many of the children there have been abused sexually.

Most have been neglected and physically abused, too. One student told me of a girl, Frannie, about eleven years old, who shocked a group of children and counselors while they were all watching a romantic movie by saying, "My private parts feel all tingly and wet." She was told not to talk about this out loud, and the counselors exchanged glances as if to say, "Look how sexualized she is!" This is a girl who had been abused several times in her short life.

Somebody needed to talk to this girl and confirm that this is a good feeling, and that even though we don't want her to announce it, this is the feeling we would want her to have when she is with someone safe and respectful in the future. Instead, the sexual feeling is seen as bad, a product of the abuse rather than a natural part of growing up to be a sexual person.

Granted, if a boy in this home were to have said something similar, he too would probably have been hushed. But I suspect that the counselors were that much more shocked by the girl's statement than they would have been by the "oversexualized" boys who talk about their erect penises.

It is rare when a girl says to her mother, like this girl in the residential home, "Mom, my vagina is feeling all tingly." By the time they can say this they already know that they shouldn't say it, or feel it. I think that for boys the message we give them is to hush up about it, but that it's okay and normal to experience it—a part of growing up. This may not have always been the case, given the strenuous attacks on boys and masturbation at the turn of the century (involving even straightjackets to keep a sleeping boy's hands away from his private parts), but today, girls are taught to strait-jacket themselves. What must not be spoken about, must not be felt.

Particularly for girls, and perhaps in response to our growing awareness of sexual abuse, the idea of private parts has been taken way too far in U.S. culture. It is meant to convey that these parts are private even to oneself. It alienates girls from their bodies. This is part of a wider cultural response to women and their bodies that contributes to disorders such as anorexia and bulimia. Shouldn't girls learn a little bit about "down there" before they reach puberty? This certainly would be a way to undo some of the body anxiety of the teen years before our girls reach them.

Chapter 7

Wanting It and Not Wanting It

"I think I felt something really twisted."

—Heather, white, 18

Women and girls buy into an idea of romantic love that means that it is fine to be sexual as long as you are passionately in love with someone and he sweeps you off your feet. Carol Cassell in her book *Swept Away* explains this feeling as a coping mechanism women develop that permits them to be sexual in this society. We "hand our sexuality over to the men in our lives, make them responsible for our submission to them. . . . We won't have sex unless we are seduced, driven, out of control."

Heather and her friend, when they were preteens, would read the *Sweet Valley High* books and act out some of the scenes. "We didn't understand concepts like lesbianism," she said, when they pretended to be boyfriend and girlfriend. One time her mother came into the room while they were naked together in bed. "We were naked all the time," said Heather. When her mother asked "What are you doing?" she answered, "Playing house," so her mother left them alone. In one particular book, *Playing with Fire*, there was a scene at a beach that alluded to a rape. This was the scene that Heather loved best to reenact because the boy was gorgeous and popular. Reflecting back as an adult, she sees that the author was trying to describe a date rape. But as a child reading the book, it was thrilling to enact first the struggle and then the yielding to the popular boy who wanted the girl.

Some women may learn to feel most sexual when they are in this passive position, like a sleeping beauty awakened by a prince. Their fantasies may be of being tied up and forced to submit to someone else's sexual desires, or of being carried off to some dark place where they are made to have sex with someone, or even of being admired and ogled at from afar because they look so sexy. I'm not denying that there is real sexual feeling in this passive position. But it does get women into trouble sexually. Women's fantasies of a man who will come along and actually do all the sexual work might not come true. And after the fantasy, in the nitty-gritty act of sex, women might not find themselves feeling much pleasure unless they know their bodies and know how to pursue it. Although the fantasy is that passionate love will bring with it sexual feeling, the best sexual feelings these girls might have are when they take the time, as they did with their childhood playmates.

It is interesting to hear how adult women, looking back on their childhood experiences, simultaneously use words depicting abuse and pleasure. Leah described how she purposely would sit between two boys on the bus home from school in seventh grade, two boys who would play a game with her by putting their hands on her leg, moving their hands a little bit higher until she would swat each hand away:

So here in the back of the bus are two boys, I'm in between like the two most popular boys in the school. . . . So I would sit in between them and they would basically just sexually harass me. I should have been offended, but I was, like, it's kind of more of a game. They'd put their hand on my knee and then fly it away, and then I'd put my hand on their knee or whatever. [So it was mutual?] Yeah, basically, like I was never upset about it. It was the kind of thing that if an adult had seen it, it would have been inappropriate behavior, and like as an adult woman, if a guy did that I would have probably completely . . . they'd just like try to get like as close as possible, like tight next to my body, 'cause they had my leg going on, and they could get closer and closer like to my thigh or to my chest or whatever. And it was mutual in the sense that there was two of them and only one of me, so like they had the upper hand. [Did it ever get serious?] No, but this was a total game, like we both, and it was kind of like the sexual behavior you get in seventh grade.

Leah said it was both a game and "sexual harassment" of a sort. As a smart, hip college student, she certainly knows about sexual harassment of

girls in the schools and also about boys' entitlement and girls' victimization. But in all her education she hasn't been taught about women's ambivalence. It has been easier to teach our daughters to fear sexual victimization than it has been to teach them about the desires they have that make them vulnerable to putting themselves in situations that they may not feel entirely comfortable in. As a college student looking back on this experience, Leah thinks these boys were "belittling her" and "objectifying her," but she also remembers liking it.

It was a game. Just like the games of tying up Barbie dolls or playing dead. In order to feel some sort of sexual pleasure, and to feel wanted by the popular boys, she entered into a game of chase and kiss, only it had more to do with her legs than her lips. In this game, she became the pursued and they the pursuers, which is a lot like the games little girls are taught about anyway, concerning sexual response: The boy pursues, the girl resists but really wants it. It's a dangerous game, I might add, as it will confuse boys about how to read girls' desires.

But it's also not just a game, because a game is usually played among equals. Leah recognized the danger in playing a game that denied boys sexual access while also showing her desire. It taught both the boys and Leah about her position as ambivalent naysayer, encouraging them and putting them off. It also reflected the impossibility of the fact that she could not be in the instigating position without being labeled a "bad" girl.

The fact that she did want it made her feel guilty. She thinks now it may have been even "sick" because she was enjoying being "sexually harassed." In labeling this as sexual harassment rather than as a gender game, a scenario played many times in boy-girl romances, Leah labels herself as a "bad" girl. Did she want to be raped? Something must be terribly wrong with her, she thinks.

Was it still sexual harassment if she enjoyed it? The elements were there. Leah was trapped between them in the bus (though she chose to sit there); there were two against one (though she liked the attention); they were trying to push her to let them feel up her leg (though wasn't she really the one in power as she swatted them away); they really were thinking of her just as a conquest or as a loose girl (though she was aware of that and continued); and finally, she enjoyed it. How should girls reconcile the pleasure of being treated as a sexual object with the codes governing good girl behavior?

Take, for example, Toni. Toni grew up in New York City in what can only be called a chaotic house that her mother tried to hold together in

every way she could. Toni's father was a drug addict and her parents would fight constantly about money—her father wanting it for drugs, and her mother keeping it for food. The kids in the family fought constantly, too: "We wasn't going to sit there and let him do that, so we was all in there." The family violence carried her to the streets, where she was in a group called "The Sweet Seven," who would go around beating people up, "just to be beating them up."

Despite this background, Toni's story here is not about violence or drugs. It's about a small amount of pleasure she had growing up with her cousin, who was a couple years older. This cousin lived with her, and would visit her at night, when she was in bed pretending to be asleep. He would feel her up and down and eventually had sex with her. In relating these events Toni vacillated between the grown-up view she holds now, that she was responsible because she allowed it to happen and enjoyed it, and the child's view she held then, that she had nothing to do with it because she was "asleep."

She told me, "When we were little we actually had sex. It was about maybe age seven. . . . I was sleeping, actually, and he came and he was feeling on me, and I was about seven or eight years old and it felt good, so I continued to act like I was asleep but I wasn't asleep." I asked her if this was because she enjoyed it, and she said, "Right, but I never told anybody. And he did it a lot, several times." When I asked if she felt any guilt about this, she said, "No, because I was asleep." Then she laughed. I asked if her enjoyment had to do with sexual feelings and she explained, "I did have sexual feelings at the time. All I know is that it felt good and I didn't want him to know that I was feeling good about it so I didn't wake up. And so I didn't say anything about it. And we never discussed it." I wanted to know more about her pretending to be asleep, worried that this was a form of sexual abuse. I asked, "What do you think stopped you from actually fully participating?" She replied:

Because if I let him know that I liked it, then I would have to participate and, then he's supposed to be my cousin, and even though he wasn't really my cousin, we were supposed to have a tie. . . . [That made it] more taboo, right?

Later in the interview I asked her why she didn't consider what she did with her cousin to be "sex" (somewhere in a discussion of other things she had said that it wasn't). Toni answered, "It wasn't sex! I didn't participate

... I wasn't involved in it. I know penetration is considered sex, but I didn't consider it sex at the time."

Pretending to be asleep, like the girls who pretended to be dead or tied up, allowed Toni to feel her sexual pleasure but to not be responsible for it, to "other" it, and to not have to acknowledge herself as a sexual being. Today we might call this act abuse, thinking that she was young and couldn't speak up for herself, and believing that whether or not she felt pleasure, she was "seduced" by an older, more experienced cousin into learning about sexual feelings that she had no business learning about at that age. But it's unclear whether this is abusive or not. If it were an adult who came in the middle of the night, even if Toni enjoyed it and pretended to be asleep, we would know this was abuse. And we wouldn't hold her responsible for telling him to stop. We would consider her too young to be able to judge that this might hurt her in the long run, and too young to be able to stick up for herself with an authority figure. Both of these reasons don't address the complexity of the situation.

The fact that it is another child, her "cousin," who is doing this to her, makes it a little different. In Toni's memory she feels a clear sense of being able to stop it if she wanted to, but she doesn't stop it and doesn't want to. Neither does she call this experience abuse. In fact, she clearly differentiates it from a rape that happened when she was a few years older. Even in retrospect, Toni said, the overall feeling was enjoyment.

Moving from New York City to a New England suburb, we find similar examples of girls discovering ways to experience what they want without having to show that they want it, as well as their confusion about how society would understand their behavior. Chrissie, in the first grade, went on a hike with her class and the boys disappeared into the woods. The teacher asked her to go find the boys and bring them back.

So I went and these boys grabbed me sort of and they said you're going to have to kiss this other boy. And I can't remember if I kissed him or anything but feeling like I was special enough to be, like, they wanted to catch me and have me kiss him. I enjoyed the drama and I enjoyed the whole sort of thing. It wasn't even as though they thought they had to coerce me, they didn't really have to do that sort of thing. . . . I know it's sick. Yeah, I want to be raped.

Something about Chrissie's narrative, as well as the narrative of others, reflects the current trend in our culture about sexuality, that it is almost al-

ways about victimization, that there are no in-betweens or ambivalences about things called "date rape" or "sexual abuse." The boys grabbed her so it's a rape.

"No is No," male college students are taught with regard to date rape. So the girl who says "no" and still sort of wants it is a "bad" girl. "Good" girls say no and mean it. What Chrissie didn't know when she said she is "sick" because she "wants to be raped," is that the rape scenario (being passive and then forced to participate) is a sexual script that all girls are taught. For some it's the only way they know they can feel pleasure. Some girls, in a dreamlike way, want to be captured and adored and admired and forced to feel pleasure. But this is not the same as wanting to be raped.

Heather, whom I spoke of at the beginning of this chapter, played out scenes from her teenage romance books with her best friend, Bess. The two would get naked under the covers and enact some of the scenes from the book, always being involved and not involved at the same time, because one would act like a director, instructing the other where to be and how to act to make the scene almost identical to the scene in the book. In retrospect, though, Heather is confused about her play, because she and her friend enjoyed enacting a rape scene. Indeed she and Bess had a deep interest in reenacting a rape scene from *Playing with Fire*.

I think I felt something really twisted. I didn't understand rape at the time. I didn't really understand that, you know, a woman doesn't want to have sex. I think because in this book the boy who she was on the beach with was supposed to be this really popular gorgeous guy. So I think that in my eight-year-old mindset I thought that was something really exciting. Like this was a cool thing to play at, and now that I think about it, I mean I am so against rape now, and when people say that women have rape wishes or whatever, I'm like, "What are you talking about?" But at the same time . . . it was kind of like the perfect thing for that stage of life, you know [and then Bess moved away], and then I didn't have to confront her or see her.

Notice that Heather told me that she didn't understand at that age that "a woman doesn't want to have sex." In her eight-year-old mind, as she put it, she wanted to have sex and couldn't see anything wrong with being passionately "taken" by a boy on the beach. She didn't understand that the girl in the story's resistance might be because the girl actually didn't want to have sex that way. This points to the positive attitude toward desire that

an eight-year-old can have before acculturation teaches girls about “proper” attitudes toward sexual feeling.

Looking at it from an eight-year-old’s perspective, Heather seems kind of healthy, rather than, as in her own words, “twisted.” It’s as if she hasn’t quite learned the gender relations of predator and object, and misreads the book to be about two mutually excited teenagers. On the other hand, she does understand that good girls do resist, and that there is excitement in that resistance, in playing out the ambivalence.

Chapter 8

Two Kinds of Guilty Pleasure

“I kind of like experienced kissing a girl—I think about it now like, ‘Oh, God!’ ”

—Tai, Puerto Rican, 30

Being a “good girl” and resisting men’s advances is especially important to Puerto Rican girls. In spite of Ricky Martin’s song of *una chica loca* (a crazy girl) who makes him drink champagne and dance naked in the rain, such stereotypes of aggressive Latina sexuality are not played out in childhood, where many girls live under the “cult of the virgin” and among “macho men.” Many of these girls were so close to their mothers they slept with them every night into their teens, avoiding childhood sexuality.

Whereas some girls can negotiate slightly (or somewhat) around wanting it and not wanting it (like Toni, who in the last chapter was “asleep,” or Heather, who allowed herself the pleasure and excitement of being “harassed”), some girls feel enormous guilt about this ambivalence. Tai and Diana, both Puerto Rican women, had childhoods in which they began to learn about their own bodies, the bodies of others, sexual pleasure, and sexual desire, but they also felt deep ambivalence and thus guilt. Most of the other Puerto Rican women I interviewed did not share many childhood secrets of sexual pleasure or desire. Maybe they kept these stories to themselves, the guilt too immense. Perhaps the protection from their mothers and the worship of virginity, both strong aspects of Puerto Rican culture, precluded development of this kind of play.

Diana and Tai, although sexual, had two very different kinds of initiations. Both experienced pleasure, both made choices to experience that pleasure, and both felt guilty afterward. Even though both felt tremendous guilt, today we would call one experience abuse, the other play; the stories show two kinds of guilty pleasure.

Diana was tough. Today, if you were to meet her as a parent at a PTA meeting, you wouldn't want to contradict her. As a child, I would imagine, she was a force to be reckoned with. Her memories of childhood included the boy whose "ass [she] kicked every day" and the day she punched a teacher who "had this thing" with her. Though she fought with her sister every day of her life, the one time she raised her hand to hit her mother, her mother "beat the shit out of [her]" and that was that. Diana never tried it again. Out of all of her family members, it was neither Diana nor her mother who was "the hitter." This distinction goes to her father, who used to beat the kids up regularly, at times losing control because he drank. She recalled:

Once he almost killed me. I was laying down in the sofa because I was crying, and he threw me with a big figurine, a big one that we had. He threw it, and if I didn't, if I wouldn't have stood up, it would have hit me. But it was because he used to drink at that time.

Living in a household with three stepbrothers, two brothers, and a sister, Diana had learned to fight for what she wanted. Parental supervision was nearly absent. She described herself as different from the other kids: "I was meaner."

The story of Diana's sexual initiation came out gradually, with reluctance. She was a kind person to interview, and seemed to want to help me out, feeling bad when she couldn't or didn't answer a question. A large woman with a baby face, long hair, and soft cheeks, her English, which was her second language, was pretty good, but she talked to me in streetwise words. Early in the interview she told me repeatedly that her memory was gone, that she can't remember much. And when I asked about kissing games she talked about her first boyfriend, whom she became involved with at the age of ten; "just a kiss," she said. Later, the truth came out. She told of an older female cousin who taught Diana what she knew and engineered Diana's sexual initiation.

The use of the word initiation may be inappropriate, as I have argued already that children are sexual and have sexual feelings from early on. But

in this case, initiation refers to a transformative experience in which a child or teen comes to see herself as a sexual being, someone with sexual feelings and desires.

Early in the interview Diana answered simple questions about sexual games by saying, "I was curious, I was curious." She was cryptic, avoiding something. Later, when I brought this question of curiosity up again, her eyes welled up with tears, and she said, "My cousin. She taught me a lot of bad things." With a sigh Diana went on:

I just want to say she [her cousin Tina] made me have sex with my own cousin when we were young. I was nine years old.

She then added:

Her brother. He's my cousin. He was maybe two years older. . . . She didn't, like, make us, but we were so by her, you know, I didn't know how it happened. All I know is she started it, you know, and we used to do it.

As the interview progressed I discovered that this had happened quite frequently over a period of two years. Diana said, "I used to like it." But when she turned eleven,

then I became, then I had my period. I never did it again. After that I never did it. And then maybe a few years after that, that's when I realized it was wrong, and I hated her. I hated her.

Diana holds simultaneously two positions: Her cousin Tina was wrong to make her do this; her cousin didn't make her do it because she enjoyed it. It was wrong; and it was pleasurable.

There are all sorts of reasons to call what Diana's cousin had her do wrong. First, there's Diana's age: only nine. Intercourse is rarely the first thing that nine-year-olds come up with as a way to experiment with their bodies and their sexuality. In addition, it is rare that a girl would come to this male-oriented pleasure on her own.

The elements of voyeurism and coercion also make this exploitation. This older girl had power over the two younger children, the power to teach them about a lot of things because they were "by her," as Diana put it, so frequently. This older cousin should have had the knowledge that

would indicate to her that Diana might grow up to regret this early sex, as well she did.

More important, there is an element of "wrongfulness" particular to the Puerto Rican community that affects Diana greatly: She lost her virginity there. Years later her husband and her father still argue about it. Her husband, whom Diana married in her teens, often reminds her father that he "didn't take her as a virgin," as if to apologize to the father for having married Diana so young. When Diana finally told her father the whole story, her father wanted to "kick his ass"—the ass of the now thirty-year-old man who as an eleven-year-old boy had taken his daughter's virginity, and not that of the female cousin who had arranged it.

The conversation between Diana's husband and her father has little to do with Diana's experience, her guilt or her pleasure. It has to do only with the disrespect a man shows another man by "taking" the daughter's virginity. Before this experience, she was prized as a virgin; after, she was ruined as a sexual girl. Diana knows this. Still, her own regret today may have less to do with when she was "taken" and more to do with her agreeing to participate, her pleasure, and the fact that the boy was her cousin, part of the family.

Diana's regret is indeed immense.

All my life is—my mind is stupid for making all those mistakes. . . . I should have known better than that . . . maybe that's what destroyed my career in school. . . . I used to always think about that. Maybe that has fucked up my whole life.

Her story shows the capacity for children to enjoy sex, but also the great shame and preoccupation that having sex too early can bring. Who knows if it actually took her away from her schoolwork, especially considering her six siblings, her alcoholic father, and a way of life that kept her in the streets day and night. There was other interference.

Today social services would label these early sexual encounters as abuse, qualified as abuse either of a child by a child or by a teen perpetrated on two children. It would be presumed that Tina, her cousin, probably had been sexually abused herself and that is why she made these children do what she wanted them to do. Victims of sexual abuse sometimes act out their trauma on other children. Diana would be a victim in this scenario. And I have to agree that this cousin, Tina, did something that hurt Diana and her cousin.

But while Diana's remorse and guilt over her part in it should not be

denied, she also carries the memory of the pleasure it gave her. Is that part so wrong? Can we hold in one hand her enjoyment of the "game," while in the other feel awful about the abuse? That would be to say that the pleasure in and of itself is not wrong.

Experts in child sexual abuse would say that Diana became oversexualized because of this early experience. Hypersexualization is indeed the one symptom that over and over again differentiates the symptomatology of sexually abused children from those who have been physically abused or neglected. These same experts would say that she became preoccupied in a way that interfered with normal friendships and school pleasures. Having problems in school is on the list of the many symptoms sexually abused children develop. But she was curious. She was curious.

The real shame here is not Diana's sexual curiosity; it is that her interest was not allowed to develop on its own. Her cousin's manipulations introduced into Diana's life elements of adult heterosexuality that she would not have encountered in our culture until later. Though the impulse might be to mourn her lost youth or her lost agency, it's important to remember the pleasure she experienced. Would that that pleasure had come about from her own choices. And would that it all had occurred in a context where girls were given the opportunity to learn about sex and to experiment with their bodies to find out what is truly pleasing to them. This would be a context free from the male guardians of virginity or from the older cousins who frame girls' sexuality in terms of intercourse with men.

Growing up in a similar neighborhood and with similar restrictions on good girls, as well as with the cult of virginity for Puerto Rican girls, Tai found a way to experience sexual pleasure, however guilty it made her feel. Her experience might serve to contrast with Diana's in these ways: She chose to do what she did totally and fully; she experimented with what felt good and found it; it did not preoccupy her but instead possibly even enhanced her childhood. On the other hand, she, like Diana, still feels guilty about what she did and didn't know what to make of the fact that she had been aroused as a child, with another little girl.

While Tai grew up in a neighborhood similar to Diana's in New York City, she led a much more sheltered life. She remembered the heat of the neighborhood, and people lining up to buy drugs down her street. But her parents were religious, and her time with her four brothers was often spent in church activities.

Tai's major sexual experience as a child came out of a friendship with a girl in her mother's best friend's family. There were five children in this

family, and although she was friends with all the children, and even played kissing games with the boys, it was with the girl in this family that Tai experimented with sexual pleasure:

Oh boy, this is a secret, and nobody knows about this. [Laughs] Okay. This is a major secret. Well, I don't remember how that was. I know I was young, and one of the girls, it must have been the youngest one, and she kind of brought this on. But when she would spend time in the house and there was no one else, it was just me and her. So we used to play house, and of course one of us had to be the husband and one had to be the wife, because that time it was always a husband and a wife, you know, not like nowadays . . . and the dolls were the babies, or whatever, and I kinda like experienced kissing a girl, which was like—I think about it now like, Oh God!! But then . . . I was growing up. I was like, oh gosh, this is like a major secret. No one can know about this, and even when I see her it never came up. . . . Actually, ummm, body contact. Both. 'Cause some girls, you know, we used to shower together, take a bath together and everything, and yeah, there was touching involved.

Tai took a long time to describe what she and this girl did together, punctuating her narrative several times with exclamations of how big a secret she was about to tell me. In her story, the part of her experience that she expressed the most shame over was the idea that there was “body contact.” And she added the word “both.” Did she mean both were doing the touching? Both were involved? Neither girl was the passive recipient? I wondered here, because of her brevity, whether I was even getting the whole story. She found it so hard to say what she wanted to say that I didn't feel comfortable pursuing her or asking her to speak more graphically. I would have had to introduce words that she wasn't using, and it is so difficult to describe these experiences without using words that evoke feelings of being dirty and ashamed or the medical and clinical side of sex. What words could I have used? I let the words “body contact” suffice.

I wondered too why this experience was so enormously hard to talk about. She had never talked about this with anyone before. Why was this her biggest secret? Because it was with another girl? Guessing at what might explain her guilt, I asked, “Was it pleasurable at the time?”

I would say, yeah. You know, because it was something we were just, we were experiencing, like I had never experienced with anyone else be-

sides the kissing. . . . So it was like we were exploring and, umm, yeah, so there was some pleasure there . . . I did get aroused, you know, during that time when there was the body contact and the touching and stuff.

At the time Tai didn't feel guilty about it, though both girls kept it a secret. Only later did guilt enter into the equation. She later labeled the experience a lesbian one and, as a heterosexual adult, this same-sex encounter made her (and continues to make her) feel guilty and wrong:

Nowadays being a lesbian is like so free. You know? Or like being gay men. Yeah, back then it was taboo, like you know you can't do this. Everyone was like very secret about it. But at that age I didn't know about lesbianism or anything like that. . . . Then after, when I was growing up, I was like, oh, they do that? You know?

Even though Tai was eleven and the other girl was eight, Tai sees the other girl as the instigator.

Because she was the type like, she was in control. She was the one who would come up with the “Okay, we're going to play this today.” And I would go along with it, and I didn't feel bad about letting her be in control.

With Tai, it is the arousal, the illicit pleasure, and the fact that it was with another girl that makes this experience her “biggest secret.” She mentioned that she and her girlfriends, as adults, once discussed whether or not they would or could have a lesbian relationship; during the interview, she confessed to me, “I didn't tell them about this.”

But why shouldn't this experience be classified as lesbian? On the one hand we can say it fits the bill. Two girls. Sex. On the other hand, childhood sexual play and games can't be classified in the same way as adult sex. It's not a choice, not a lifestyle, not an orientation—yet. It's childhood. To call this experience *only* experimentation, though, takes something away from the idea that this pleasure in childhood is something real.

Diana and Tai both had sexual experiences in childhood that today they look back on seriously. Both of these experiences meant something to them in terms of how they defined themselves sexually. Neither could quite accept the sexual pleasure they felt as something positive. Because of their Puerto Rican upbringing, the loss of virginity is disruptive for Diana.

But also the fact that intercourse is not the best way for a girl to learn about herself and her sexual feelings, especially not under the command of an older cousin, Diana feels permanently damaged. Tai, on the other hand, had a more gentle introduction to sexual pleasure, from another girl, a younger girl. And although her experience brought with it some confusion and guilt, there was also some delight. Perhaps her delight was more unspoken, something that I as an interviewer had to intuit in her laughter and expressions of exuberant exclamations as she told her story. Perhaps it was only in contrast to Diana, the burden of whose guilt and trauma seemed constantly present in the interview, a shroud she could not throw off, as an adult, with a laugh.

Chapter 9

African-American Girls and Their Secrets

"To name ourselves rather than be named we must first see ourselves.

. . . So long unmirrored, we may have forgotten how we look."

—Lorraine O'Grady, in *Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Female Black Subjectivity*

African-American women "have no acknowledged sexuality," according to Hortense Spillers, a scholar who writes about Black women and fiction. But Gail Wyatt, an African-American psychologist at the University of California at Los Angeles, reminds us in her book *Stolen Lives* that when there isn't a "deafening silence" there is a barrage of "negative messages and expectations" about an African-American girl's ability to control her sexuality. Researchers consistently look at African-American girls' sexual behavior in terms of "deviance" rather than "development." Ironically, the media perpetuates the stereotype of the promiscuous Black teen by disproportionately profiling Black girls who are "out of control" and at high risk for early pregnancy. They set up an assumption that all American Black girls grow up in the projects and city streets and add to that false assumption that these urban girls are loose and immoral. African-American girls and women, however, do have sexual lives in childhood similar to white girls, and experiences that are not always as difficult or as tragic as the media would have you believe.

Because of the prevalence of such stereotypes about African-American girls and women and their sexuality, and because of how these

stereotypes affect these girls, I chose to write about them in a separate chapter. Their stories are also integrated in other chapters with the stories of white girls, middle-class and low-income girls, and girls from other minority groups. But because there appears to be an absence of attention to healthy development in African-American girls, it is particularly important to give these girls and women a space here where their experiences are heard together. This does not mean their experiences are so different. In fact, the only difference is that African-American girls tend to play with boys rather than other girls.

Other ethnic groups of girls aren't covered in separate chapters simply because I didn't interview enough of a variety within each group to feel comfortable making statements about them as a whole. Although I interviewed a number of Puerto Rican women who live in the States, unlike the interviews with African-American women and girls, I interviewed very few girls, and most of the women came from the same neighborhood. These interviews are intermingled in other chapters, and I hope they serve as a springboard for studying how other racial stereotypes may affect young girls' sexual development.

Some but not most of the interviews of African-American women and girls took place in a housing project, and some of these sexual stories take place in the context of very difficult childhoods, a few involving abuse; however, even the girls who grew up under these circumstances also shared happy tales of childhood exploration and healthy interest in sex.

Included also are stories about middle-class African-American girls whose similarities to other middle-class girls are immense. These girls and women share a history of oppression with other Black girls, but this oppression, given the neighborhood, the income, and the decade in which they lived, affects them to differing degrees. Altogether, the stories of Black girls and women in this chapter do not and cannot coalesce into one single story of African-American girlhood. Yet overwhelmingly, they are positive stories, and presented together will show a certain strength and honor and healthy sexual presence in African-American girls.

Toni, Josephine, O'Brishia, and Denitra grew up in the projects. Called "urban girls" today, they experienced much the same environment that Shamika, Tanisha, and Rashonda, the youngest African-American girls I interviewed, are experiencing today. Even though they all grew up or are growing up in the city, they defy stereotyping. Some of these girls were out of control and some were just observers of the scene. Some were beaten and abused, some protected or able to avoid abuse through the help of

others. Some could leave their neighborhoods, some stayed, and some who had left returned and ended up being brought down. Some girls had sex early and seemed not to respect their parents or teachers; others stayed far away from boys and did their homework. African-American girls are as different from one another as white girls.

There are Robin and Marissa, both college girls at a good school. Both had warm, upper-middle-class upbringings with loving parents who kept a close watch on them. Their experiences are not much different from the white girls who grew up in the suburbs and whose parents were professionals. And yet they remain African-American women, carrying additional burdens because of racial prejudice and special talents because of racial heritage.

Lillian, Cora, and Betty grew up in the 1940s and '50s in urban areas, but with a lot of the South in their families and personalities. They knew the "switch" as a rightly deserved punishment, and laughed about it looking back, but they also got undeserved beatings, some that left lifelong scars. They had sex with boys or older men fairly early, getting pregnant and marrying in their teens like many of their peers. Despite such "sophistication," that didn't mean they didn't play chase and kiss, post office, or house!

Valerie, Lynn, Felicia, Charise—they grew up in the fifties, sixties, and seventies in a city neighborhood. They grew up in an African-American working-class neighborhood, usually with fathers around, extended families, and church playing a big part of their lives. They didn't suffer the abuse that Betty, Cora, and Lillian did. But like those three, they too played around and experimented with boys in a way that shows interest and self-esteem.

While their games show a resistance to good girl mythology, a particularly white mythology, as well as a healthy, if secret, attitude toward sexual play and games, they differed from white girls in one respect: most African-American women do not remember playing sexual games with other girls. While the white women I interviewed had played games with either boys or girls, African-American women played primarily with boys. The same sense of experimentation and pleasure is present, only it occurs mostly in games with boys. The ones who played with other girls are the middle-class African-American girls; for them, there was a lot more freedom to experiment and play before teenage sexuality grabbed them. Teenage sexuality gets pushed on the urban girls a bit sooner, leaving less room for girl-to-girl sexual play.

Cora, a fifty-seven-year-old woman who grew up in the South and then moved to the city projects, remembered her little games with the boys with great pleasure.

Y'know, we would be out in the yard. Y'know, we always would be in the open, not in no little closed part . . . this was our little thing and this was the life that we wanted to live. We were seven, eight, nine, ten . . . so it was just the typical little stuff that we used to do. . . . We want to get married and have children. . . . I know my mother would say, Oh, y'know, you don't have no business playing like that . . . and we just never told them. We knew we not supposed to do that. Okay, after I got my period where she always tell me to keep your dress down.

One thing that may have prevented more exploration in Cora's childhood was the threat of beatings. Her father would abuse her brutally, sometimes to bleeding; she still bears the scars. The possibility of a beating kept her and children like her scared.

One time, me and my girlfriend and the brother they always, they want to show private parts, and I say, "Oh no, no, we can't do that, 'cuz Mom" and y'know they call their grandmother, Moe, they call her Moe and my mother we called Mama, and so we say, "No, no, we can't." I said we couldn't go that route. . . . Yeah, and so I felt a little guilty. We were scared if one told it everybody gonna get in trouble.

In contrast, Lillian had a lot more gumption. She was one of those girls who played quite a few sexual games, remembered them fondly, and never worried about whether she was "normal" or not.

Lillian, now sixty-three years old, played a funny little game with the boys in her neighborhood when she was a preteen.

We played "pinch and grow." The girls would stand in the closet or in the corner of a dark room, and you never knew who was comin' at you, but it would be a guy, and he would run in and the fellows always felt that if you'd pinch the girls' boobs they'd grow. . . . I loved it! I thought it was the greatest thing! 'Cuz pinch and grow worked two ways. The guys would be in the room and the girls would have to go in there and would pinch a little lower . . . the girls would call it grab and hang. . . . I liked the idea of doing that because I felt it was something I could get away with doing and nobody knew who did it.

She also talked about the old-fashioned game of Post Office:

Post Office was different. . . . You didn't know who the guy was that came in, but you'd have to go to the post office to mail a letter or to buy a stamp or whatever, and you knew that there was a guy in there. But no one on the other side knew what was going on. So you could go in there and do darn near anything depending on how fresh the fellow was or how fresh the girls was. . . . It wasn't until I was much older that I did things that I felt that I was really way in over my head and didn't know how to get out of it. . . . It was still play. It was a lot of fun.

And there was a game in which she and her friends would run into the alleys to meet a boy, kiss in a doorway, and plan to meet in secret later at night.

Mmmmm. There was a lot of things that we did. I guess you might consider them games, but then again they're not games. We'd write notes back and forth and tell each other what we're gonna do, and then we'd try to make that come true. . . . And I used to tell him I'd meet him in the basement, and I guess that's where I learned a lot about sex, because we called it playing the game. They'd play hide-and-seek outside and I'd be in the basement, and I'd open the door, and that was when the one twin would come in to hide. The other twin happened to notice that this one was going there and they could never find him. . . . One day both of them came in. Well, there was nothing goin' on that day, and then my mom heard about my back door being open down there. So that was over.

Despite a variety of hardships that Lillian had suffered before she turned thirteen—the threat of beatings by her grandmother, a chaotic home life—she still played several of these games that involved sexual feelings and sexual fun. Like ball games with boys:

If you could hit him you had to go up in the back with him to soothe his ache. We didn't have a name for that, but all the girls would try to hit him in the testicles, because wherever you hit him with the ball you had to rub that spot.

She also played a game where the kids would sit in a circle and pass around a cigarette: "We never smoked, but whoever dropped an ash would have to

take off a piece of clothing." She even encouraged her friends' sexuality, explicitly instructing, "C'mon Mary, you'll like it. You know, it ain't bad. Let him put his finger over there. You'll be surprised what'll happen." Then Mary would say, "Oh, my God, you're dirty!!!" Lillian would say right back, "It's not dirty. That's life."

There's a lot of power and pleasure in Lillian's childhood explorations with boys and sex. She invited it. She taught other girls about it. Maybe she even talked about pleasure: "You'll be surprised what'll happen." She went on to tell her best friend, in a healthy way, that sex is not dirty, it's "life." Despite this seeming maturity, Lillian knew nothing about contraception. In addition, she maybe trusted men too much.

At thirteen, Lillian got pregnant because of a deception. Lillian got pregnant from a twenty-eight-year-old man whom she had sex with willingly. He said he loved her. He said he would protect her. He said he would wear a condom, and he did. But when she got pregnant, he told her that he had purposely put a hole in the condom before having sex with her. Nevertheless, she married him. Not unexpectedly, he was not a good husband; he beat her, just as she had been beaten by her grandmother at home. After enduring beatings at home for such a long time, a girl will sometimes take the first chance she gets to get out of her house, even if she ends up in a similar situation elsewhere. But how was she to know at thirteen?

Lillian's sex education until the age of thirteen was a sex education in which she felt like a full participant, not a victim, not a passive object. That's a good way to feel as a child. So where did things go wrong? The problem may not have been in the sexual games but in the partner whom she trusted, the man who lied to her. Raised by a grandmother who beat her, unprotected by parents, her decision to hang around a twenty-eight-year-old man came from lack of supervision rather than a self-destructive impulse.

Many of the other stories of African-American girls, including the more recent ones, have better endings, and they have been told in previous chapters where they fit, unseparated from their sisters. In chapters on "chase and kiss" or "practice kissing," African-American girls' stories show Charise, for example, who played "catch a girl, kiss a girl" (at least that's what the boys called it), where the girls would eventually go off to kiss the boy who caught them in the alley. And there is Yvonne, who kissed boys in truth-or-dare games. Jeanine practice-kissed a boy in a closet from about the age of six until it "really" mattered, around age twelve.

Nevertheless, few of the African-American women worried about

whether what they had done was normal or not. It is possible that because I was white, they didn't want to be in the position of asking a white woman to judge them on issues of normality. Perhaps they thought that my normal couldn't possibly be theirs. But none of the African-American women that my assistant Bev Colston interviewed asked her this question either, and she is Black. None seemed as concerned as the white girls we interviewed to ask of their experiences, "Is this typical?" or "Am I normal?"

It could be that African-American women gave up a long time ago trying to understand normal, which meant to them trying to measure up to white society's version of what a "good" or "normal" girl was. There is a long history of white people calling African-American people abnormal or crazy because they are different. Perhaps, as Lillian said, even without sex education, they simply grew up knowing that sex was a part of life. Yet these guesses do not fully answer the question.

Perhaps the lack of girl-to-girl games explains why African-American women, looking back, had fewer concerns about whether they were normal. In the few girl-to-girl sexual games that African-American women remembered, they described them as being about curiosity and experimentation, rather than desire. Lynn played one such game with another little girl, her best friend Billie.

They were games like mostly close examination games. Yes, very close examination games. It wasn't a game, but it was really like intense curiosity and like just having to see absolutely everything. So I remember that clearly. . . . So it was something with having to do with health and investigation—pure science and health, and so all the rules would follow from that. We would come up with things that we thought might be wrong and that had to be checked out. And everything was always okay after a thorough checkup . . . maybe we assured ourselves too that everything was okay and normal.

Arlene had a very protective mother who was concerned that she not get in trouble with boys. Like the middle-class white mothers, she tried to protect her daughter from them. For example, she would not allow Arlene to have boys in the clubhouse, although Arlene would sneak them in. She moved the family when Arlene was twelve, to get her out of this "fast" neighborhood where kids started having sex early. Arlene remembered all-girl sleepovers at this age and earlier, where the girls "getting dressed would show each other stuff." It didn't feel sexual, she recalled, "it

felt curious." Like other African-American women interviewed, she drew a boundary there. She did not identify play as sexual if it was with other girls.

Valerie also described a girl-to-girl experience that is similar to Arlene's; it is about curiosity rather than sexual feeling. She showed her growing breasts to other girls, and they showed her theirs, everyone comparing to see if everything was all right. Valerie's mother, like Arlene's, was "very strict, very straight with everything." With this straightness at home, curiosity games may have been the limit to what they permitted themselves.

Strictness and straightness in African-American families who have close ties with their church may be one reason sexual play between girls didn't go very far. But the concern was probably for a different kind of straightness: that is to say, the taboo against homosexuality in African-American culture. Often noted in relation to African-American men who feel the need to prove their masculinity and power to a world that tries to beat them down, this taboo is well documented. But what about for girls? Does the fear of homosexuality extend to them? It would seem so.

Thirteen-year-old Kalinda wouldn't play truth-or-dare games because it was too close to kissing girls.

But I mean, like I won't kiss somebody because we could be like five girls and like two boys playing. And every girl has this dare to kiss both of the boys, and then when it's your turn to kiss 'em, like everybody has already kissed him. It's like kissing all the other girls and I don't like that. . . . If you want to kiss the boy that just kissed five other girls, why don't you kiss the five girls, because it seems like it's the same thing.

What kinds of risks do girls who play sexual games with boys take? Rarely does a girl-to-girl game become abusive. In girl-to-boy games girls have to set boundaries more clearly. LaShauna, a twelve-year-old, described this in her idyllic treehouse setup with Julio.

I mean, like, I wouldn't necessarily lay on top of him, but I'd like hug him and stuff. And then I wasn't too into reading, but when I did have a chance to read I would read to him and stuff. . . . And I knew that as long as he didn't go over this line, like there was a boundary, as long as he didn't cross over it, that it was okay.

LaShauna knows the boundary. But the risk for other girls may be abuse or getting too sexual too soon and orienting their own sensuality and sexuality toward boys' pleasures rather than giving themselves space and time to discover their own bodies.

Playing sexual games with other girls can help girls understand themselves before seeing themselves so totally from a male perspective, as adolescent girls often do. Through this kind of play they begin to experiment with adult images and versions of sexuality before being forced to face a male-defined adult world of sex, a world that requires boundary-setting from girls and an assertiveness they may not yet have developed. The transition to real-life heterosexual sexual relationships can be a dangerous one for girls, both in terms of the expectations regarding romance and the amount of violence and devastation that can take place in the high school years. Girl-girl play may be a safe haven before the storm, but African-American girls look upon such play with suspicion.

From another perspective, African-American girls' play with boys may be helpful to them in different ways. While it may put them at risk of exposure to more male-related definitions of their own sexuality before they have a chance to understand it themselves, it may also help them to grow up to be more comfortable around boys. They may be more able than girls who play with other girls to envision themselves later as sexual partners to men, rather than objects, prey, or victims. They may also develop a special empathy for boys and men as being just as vulnerable as they are underneath that veneer of hypersexualized masculinity that many boys are encouraged to develop in adolescence. Still, it wasn't only a preference for girl-boy sexual play that many African-American girls showed, but sometimes a fear of girl-girl play.

Marissa, from an upper-middle-class African-American family on the West Coast, also balked at girl-to-girl sexual games. In one instance, she had gone to a predominantly white summer camp where the girls decided to have a "naked party." All the girls took their clothes off and ran around the campground; Marissa was the only one to keep them on. To her, the whole experience was "really scary."

As the home-schooled daughter of a family that prayed together every morning, Marissa's feelings could have been due to her strict upbringing. The whole idea of girls playing this way was most likely foreign and shocking to her. Marissa was also the girl who felt terribly guilty about the time she sat naked in the dark with a younger girl, not touching, but feeling the thrill of just being naked. Strictness in families may have more bearing on

the way children make sense of sexual play and games than on whether or not they play them.

The strictness in African-American families can be a source of pride. There is often also humor in the older African-American women's memories of their mothers or fathers getting out a switch, "a peach tree limb that was about two miles long," to beat them with when they were bad. This strictness sometimes can seem too violently enacted or, ironically, to go hand in hand with a lack of supervision over the children. Still, it reflects a respect for family rules and parents' authority.

While the strictness around sexuality that white girls described was more about being a good girl and not a slut, the strictness that the African-American girls described as present in their families seemed to be either about respect or about protection. Respecting one's elders by not talking back, making trouble, or creating more work for them meant children were forced to obey parents more exactly. When the strictness came in the form of protection, these girls had fewer opportunities to play sexual games.

The strictness may also have come out of a fear that their daughters would be judged as "typically oversexual black women." Aware of the conventional assumptions and the particular vulnerabilities to being stereotyped as loose and immoral, black families may have created a protected space around their daughters. Unfortunately, this protection may have had its costs in terms of freedom even within the family.

More than white girls, African-American and Puerto Rican girls orient their sexuality toward boys and men. This may be because they play more with boys or because the gender relations of adulthood, where men are dominant, play out in their childhood games. Though this extra gender contact makes them more comfortable with boys, it could make them vulnerable to engaging earlier in sex. In a later chapter called "Too Sexual Too Soon," I give examples of girls' vulnerability to defining their sexuality in terms of pleasing boys and men.

Feminist author and cultural critic bell hooks, speaking for African-American women, writes: "We lose sight of the way in which the ability to experience and know pleasure is an essential ingredient of wellness." A challenge for African-American women that is different from white women is to find a comfortable sexuality that works with their culture and yet won't substantiate white myths of looseness and lack of control in the African-American community.

Janie Ward, educator and author of *The Skin We're In*, a book for African-American parents today, writes of the temptation among African-American adolescents to invest in clothing and appearance as a means of distinguishing themselves in a frequently dismissive society. Feeling unseen and invisible in the larger culture, it may be similarly tempting to girls to become an object to someone, to be admired and felt and seen and desired.

African-American girls take a risk in losing themselves to the white myth of the loose African-American woman when they acknowledge their own sexual desire. While the image of the sexual Black woman might serve to make white women feel more pure or good in a world that tries to put down all women by calling them sluts when they simply express desire, that same image can make an African-American girl feel wrong and stereotyped. Furthermore, it can make her feel less deserving of the respect and consideration granted to white girls and women.

Is there a place for a girl and her sexuality in this world if she is African American? Elijah Anderson's street sociology of an African-American urban community presented in *Streetwise* shows maybe not. He reduces their experience thus: "[G]irls have a dream, the boys a desire." On the surface, the African-American girls and women may look like they want a man and a baby and a house, but they want to feel sexual desire too. They want to feel pleasure without being labeled a whore. If even this African-American sociologist denies this part of women, seeing girls' desires as merely tricks to get men to be with them, then we see how large the problem is. We must all recognize and support the healthy sexual development of the African-American girl without degrading her.

Chapter 10

*Periods, Pubic Hair, Boobies,
and Bodily Torture*

"God didn't want—he wanted some land of perfect, dry, carcasslike beings that had no leaky parts, emotions, water, blood."

—May, white, 33

Girls develop sexual feelings before they "develop," so to speak. If they get any sex education in the schools, it's not until fifth or sixth grade, sometimes long after they have begun to experience sexual feelings and play sexual games, but near the time they reach puberty. Society and schools believe that children aren't and shouldn't be interested in sex until then.

Despite common reservations about introducing sex education at such a young age, there are all sorts of anxieties that it could address before puberty. The most burning question girls have, but don't ask, is simply "Am I normal?" Girls are anxious about sexual feelings, masturbating, and about what it means to be "sexy." They are impatient to know "what's down there" and what people call it. Later, girls worry about getting their periods and about how their body is developing. The more opportunities girls have to discuss these changes, even comparing bodies with a close friend, the better they feel about themselves and their changes.

Most children around the world do not get their sex education from their parents. In fact, anthropologists have found that they get it from their peers. This has been true and is still true here in the United States. Plus, research shows that African-American and Puerto Rican girls get

even less than Caucasian girls, although I suspect that the research reflects socioeconomic class rather than racial differences.

Back in the thirties, forties, and fifties, there wasn't any sex education in the schools. In less educated, lower socioeconomic areas, the sex education consisted of merely a mysterious warning about staying away from boys once a girl got her period.

Cora's mother, who raised Cora in the forties' South, may have been typical.

Okay, after I got my period, where she always tell me, keep your dress down. She never talk to me about that. No nothing about it. Everything I know I eavesdropped it from my older sister and a cousin. And so that's how I found out everything. First thing my mother say, "Well, you better keep your dress down." And I said, Well, I got to go to the bathroom, but that's all she said.

Like Cora, another African-American woman, Yvonne, grew up in the forties and fifties in the South. She told me that when she went to ask her mother about sex, "Where do babies come from?" her mother pushed her away and scolded her, saying, "Don't get fresh with me!"

This attitude pervaded into the fifties when, Elenora, a thirty-eight-year-old Puerto Rican woman from Manhattan, told me, her mother would not allow anyone to talk about sex in the house.

Patty, who grew up in this era but in a white Irish and Polish Catholic neighborhood of Massachusetts, got a similar brush-off from her mother.

I remember my mother handed me a booklet she must have gotten from, you know, Modess or Tampax, and that was how she explained my period. That was it. She didn't talk to me about it, and sex was never a discussion.

By contrast, Miranda, an eleven-year-old girl, said she can talk about everything with her mother, including sex: "I can go and say, 'I want a bra mommy.' Actually, I did that just today."

Even though we might think that Americans have become modern and liberal about sex education (compared to our parents and grandparents, perhaps we are), most sex education courses still don't offer enough to girls. If parents take a proactive stance in the home, their daughters might learn a lot. But if they leave it to the school, the sheer absence of

discussion of desire and play allows girls to remain ignorant or forces them to rely on other—often unreliable—sources of information.

Sex ed's primary purpose these days is to teach girls about menstruation and abstinence. In fact, in some states it is illegal to teach anything in a sex education program except abstinence and parts of the body. In 1969, in my junior high's sex education course, we were given a slide show with close-up images of penises infected with gonorrhea and syphilis in its later stages. Accurate about the diseases, yes, but should this be a young girl's first impression of male genitalia? The sex education I remember from that year had very little to do with the little Kotex booklet my mother gave me, which was entitled, "Very Personally Yours." It had more to do with the punches I received from Scott Hansen, the boy who had a crush on me, and the admiration I felt when I saw the beautiful Mrs. Lang, my language arts teacher, at her second job, waiting tables in tight pants and a halter top.

Sex education, at its best, teaches girls about sexual pleasure and about relationships (in addition to biology, contraception, abstinence, and disease). Girls want to know about intercourse. How to do it. Will it hurt? Girls focus on the details of intercourse because both the movies they see and the boys around them define sex this way. Unfortunately, sex education becomes male-oriented in that it usually focuses on prevention of intercourse for girls. This focus on intercourse is also problematic for boys, as they grow up to have a very limited view of what brings them sexual pleasure.

Sex education needs to teach girls that sex is more than intercourse. Sex is about sexual pleasure as well as reproduction, about relationships and mutuality, about knowing one's body.

Current arguments against sex are based on the fear that if girls are taught about pleasure, they will want sex more. Under scrutiny, the fear appears to be of girls becoming more like boys, or our stereotypes of boys in their insatiable sexual hunger, that girls will not be girls anymore.

Both feminist author Sharon Thompson, in *Going All the Way*, and feminist professor of education Michelle Fine, in "The Missing Discourse of Desire," suggest that if girls understood more about sexual pleasure they would be less likely to be hurt by the expectation of great love and romance, less likely to be swept away (without birth control), more likely to think of themselves and be a little more selfish in sexual encounters, more free to bring out birth control, and more likely, I think, to avoid intercourse at an early age. What would be so bad about that?

Masturbation

Author Karin Flaake wrote these wise words in her essay "A Body of One's Own," speculating about how a mother might talk to her young daughter about masturbation:

Your body, like mine, is female, it is good and valuable, and you can experience physical enjoyment and sexuality with your own body independent of me . . .

She goes on to say:

The girl can experience her own femininity as an autonomous source of enjoyment and creativity, and with this fundamental self-confidence, she is no longer exclusively dependent on the opposite sex for the acknowledgment of her femininity.

Many adult women, though no girls I spoke to (understandably), told me about their first masturbation experience. Masturbation challenges the idea that children are sexual innocents. Even so, I didn't feel comfortable enough to ask most of them explicitly. May, however, asked me, "Aren't you going to ask about masturbation?" Her generous offer to talk about masturbation helped me to listen better to the women I interviewed after her to look for an opening in the conversation when I might ask specifically about masturbation.

As a girl, May was ashamed of masturbating. Ironically, her mother was a nurse and genuinely approved of it; she taught May all about the human body as she was growing up. But May still felt guilty. She would come downstairs after masturbating and tell her mother she had done it, and her mother would say, "That's fine."

Of all the people, my mother is the most open, so that's why I find it tragic that a young girl can think it's bad, even when their primary caretaker is telling them it's okay. It's all right. One time, my father came in while I was in the midst of masturbating. Oh my God! And I remember that stern look—you did not do that!

Patty, who grew up in the sixties, a decade before May, also remembered masturbating. In a household where no one discussed sex at all, she seemed to have found bodily pleasure.

I do remember sort of playing with myself and my mother coming in and saying, "Girls, don't do that!" You know, I'd be in bed at night, and just kind of, yeah, "What are you doing? Don't do that." . . . So yeah, that was a sexual feeling. It just felt good, whatever it was.

A decade earlier, in the fifties, Linda used to rub against a hassock. She still remembered the sexual pleasure she got from it.

I think I accidentally discovered sexual feelings while rolling around on a hassock, and discovered masturbation. And she [her mother] was very, very upset with me. . . . I just remember her being very stern and telling me that good girls didn't do this. . . . I thought I had done something terribly wrong.

Linda also drew pictures of naked women with breasts and pubic hair: "I was curious, just curious, I guess."

Clearly masturbation was not something that good girls did, or do. Although by that time experts were telling parents that masturbation didn't lead to blindness or mental retardation, it was still something ladies or good girls didn't do.

Parents probably saw it as their obligation to teach their girls appropriate behavior. They probably would have stopped a son from masturbating too, for that matter. It is partially parents' embarrassment that makes them act the way they do. They honestly don't know what to do, thinking that they are not supposed to see sexual pleasure in a child as much as thinking that a child shouldn't find sexual pleasure. They would prefer it if that was something very private, something they didn't have to deal with. To be generous to these parents, I think that many were saying something more akin to "Cover up; it's embarrassing and unladylike" rather than that it is morally wrong.

Even so, the message to girls is still that masturbation is unacceptable and wrong. More important, since it is rarely discussed, especially among young girls, it remains unknown and, to a certain extent, taboo. The parts can't be named. The feelings have no place. The pleasure has no words.

Body Changes

Sexual education about pleasure should also address the changes in girls' bodies. Girls are fascinated by naked bodies from early on. Quite a few people I interviewed remembered drawing pictures of naked and voluptuous women. Robin, an African-American college student, even remembered standing on a toilet in a stall to spy on her teacher going to the bathroom.

But there's anxiety as well as interest. The transition from girls to women, through breast development and menstruation, requires that girls negotiate the forces of adult femininity. Breast development teaches them about being "sexy" and being looked at. Menstruation teaches something about subordination and dark secrets. Researcher Janet Lee, in her study of forty women's narratives of menarche, writes that menstruation made many of the women in her study feel dirty. They talked about hiding the evidence, the stains, the bulges. Many talked about a sense of bodily alienation. Even in the joking among kids you can see this sense of body alienation. There is a loss of control.

The young girls I spoke to joked and giggled about busty women. Eleven-year-old Miranda and her friend play a game that expresses both wonderment and embarrassment about how breasts are sexual. In the bathtub they put squishy things in their bathing suits and pretend to bite each other on their breasts, saying, "Oh, I love you," and then they crack up.

When a girl can share this anxiety, fear, or pride with another girl, positive things happen. Valerie, an African-American woman in her forties now, recalls that she and her friends started developing breasts around age eleven. She remembered that she and her girlfriend showed each other their first bras and later, with their friends, everyone showed each other their breasts. This kind of sharing brings relief to kids who can't get that kind of reassurance from even the most liberal of parents. It reminds them that they are not alone and reintroduces a sense of wonderment in the process.

Some of the anxiety about bodily changes manifests itself in troubling ways. As May puts it,

Good meant being nonsexual. God didn't want—he wanted some land of perfect, dry, carcasslike beings that had no leaky parts, emotions, water, blood. . . . To this day I have this sense of God as a stern, white,

marble male who is looking down, and just things about me which were like sensual or, you know, from the body, the leaking of the body . . . it was just a nightmare.

Because of these “leaky parts,” it was embarrassing to be a woman.

Daria and her friends, who used to tie up their Barbie dolls and pretend to pluck the pubic hairs out of them one by one, captured this embarrassment about bodily changes. (Barbie already wordlessly shows ambivalence about the teenage body because she comes with no hair anywhere except on her head.) My friend Debbie told me a long time ago, when we exchanged secrets, that she and some other girls who were seven or eight at the time went into the forest and rubbed dried leaves on their vaginas. Whether exciting or not, the symbolism of this is pretty clear. Dirty leaves on a dirty spot—the leaves look like the pubic hair that would grow there soon.

When I was in the sixth grade, my friend Candy and I did something weird (yes, I call it weird, knowing that we all say that about our stories!). We left art class with red paint and secretly painted red streaks on the bathroom Kotex machines. Neither of us had gotten our periods yet, and we thought this was great fun. It was as if someone who was dripping blood from getting her period was desperate for a Kotex.

Connie, who, as I did, grew up in the sixties when there was sex education in the fifth grade, remembered teasing another girl mercilessly about getting her period. She and her friends would go on and on about how “bloody” she got. The girl would be totally embarrassed.

Sometimes being with a friend helps a girl to feel less anxious, comparing how much pubic hair she has or how her breasts are developing. Joining together fights off humiliation and provides support and comfort around shared worries. As psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan wrote, having a chum is a way to see yourself reflected in another and to know that you are totally acceptable the way you are.

Sexy Rather Than Sexual

Admiring my language arts teacher, Mrs. Lang, as a seventh-grader, I knew the importance of having a sexy body. Somehow all the changes of puberty are supposed to result in just that, a sexy rather than a sexual body, a body to be looked at but not one which expresses one's own desire. It is the un-

usual girl who grows up with such a connection between her spirit and her body that she feels her body to be an expression of all parts of herself. Anne Stirling Hastings, in *Body and Soul*, writes about how children learn to cut off awareness of important information about their bodies from an early age. She says that we are not taught about what it means to “live in one's body.” She points out that “all women are shamed for having a body that isn't sexy at some time or another.” The idea that how one looks comprises one's sexuality, that sexuality is conferred on a girl from the looks she gets from others, is true in part, and also dangerous to girls. When they are taught to deny their sexual feelings as coming from within, they become dependent on others for pleasure. And they feel tremendous guilt.

There's a lot that goes on today to try to teach girls about not succumbing to media pressures to judge themselves by appearance alone. The alternative given to girls is to take pride in their accomplishments, in school, in sports. But this alternative supports a different notion of the good girl, a notion that can be oppressive itself. Can we have an alternative that tells girls that *anyone* can be sexual, even if they don't look sexy? Yes. By teaching them that sexy is not only being desirable, but being being desirous; by affirming their sexual feelings and wants as their own, and all right.

We can offer girls a way to be sexual and not just sexy, to feel in themselves sexual energy and erotic pleasure, through a more comprehensive program of sex education. What a joy to them such an education could be.

Chapter 11

Guilty Minds and Sexual Obsessions

A sexual boy is considered a normal boy, but a sexual girl is seen as a problem that has to be solved. We are used to the idea of girls being innocent of sexual thoughts and desires. But if a girl has them, we automatically assume that she has had a seductive parent who introduced these ideas too early or that she has been abused and is trying to master her trauma.

The following three stories push the boundaries of normal, at least for the women who reside in them. These women look back with tremendous guilt over sexual feelings, thoughts, and acts. They see themselves as either obsessed with sex, evil, or terribly strange. Each came to the interview as one would a confessional. And because I did not think that their sexual stories were so shocking or particularly abnormal, each of them seemed to come away from the interview a little more lighthearted.

The first girl, Chrissie, called herself weird and deviant: "obsessed with sex." She is a college student from an upper-middle-class white family in New England. Her guilt comes in part from her father, who is a "committed Christian" with his own anxieties about sex. Her "obsession" with sex, and her guilt about it, enacts a conflict in her parents' marriage.

The second girl, Olivia, called herself a weirdo. She, like Chrissie, is also a college student, but she comes from a Latino family that had some financial struggles, and she grew up in the Southwest. Olivia's childhood sexual life is full: she got to know her body and bodily pleasure early; she experimented, played, and found pleasure through sexual activities with

other children; and she was also coerced, harassed, and bugged sexually by boys and also even girls. She took it all in; she worked it through; and she emerges as someone who feels quite able to cope with sexuality and make healthy choices as an adult.

Dorothy Jean also saw herself as strange, so different and deviant that she insisted we do the interview in her own home, where no one could hear or see us, and also while her husband was not home, lest he overhear. Still, even before I stepped foot in her house, just the idea of a book on the secret lives of girls led her to revisit some of her early experiences and reevaluate them. If these experiences could be talked about, maybe they weren't so bad. She wondered whether she could risk talking to me? She hoped that I would be able to tell her that she was not deviant.

These are not stories filled with giggles and the sexual delight of mutual, hidden girlhood games, although there was pleasure. Other women who played one or two little childhood games were well able to other them (someone else made them do it) or dismiss them (because it was a single incident, it wasn't really them). But women who played many games or played a game that went on for years became convinced that they were doing something terribly wrong. Their guilt is exceptional for its persistence.

Kissy Killer Chrissie:**The Sins of the Father are Visited on the Daughter**

Chrissie loved to chase the boys on the playground and kiss them. She even remembered making a deal with one boy that if she played the game he wanted to play, then he would have to play "kissy killers" with her. "I would get into it," she confessed. She liked the "active" part of the game, she said, and she also liked that in the game she was allowed to "get violent,"

like I liked the struggling, like not letting them kiss you, but having an excuse almost maybe to even fight. . . . It's like, if they caught me I could kick and scream because I was allowed to do that . . . and I was supposed to be resisting.

Chrissie clearly knew that the role she must play is the resister, the one who doesn't really want to be kissed. Yet ironically, she played that role

with relish, allowing herself to be violent, to feel powerful and sexual in the struggle.

Chrissie was thrilled by the game, the risk, and the thought that she was dangerous. She enjoyed the "victim" role as well, enacting the struggle, enjoying the resistance. But she also carried the name of Kissy Killer Chrissie, confirming that in the eyes of her peers her own sexual desires were dangerous.

Chrissie's background in part explains her feelings of guilt. She grew up in a well-to-do family, attended public schools, and did very well: she was a "good girl" and never liked to disobey a teacher or receive a disapproving glare. Her father was a very religious man, and Chrissie knew the story of her parents' romance from a very early age. When her parents met, her father was struggling to remain a virgin until marriage because of the teachings of the church. But he didn't, resulting in pregnancy and then marriage. Her father felt tremendous guilt over his premarital sexuality, and told Chrissie, "You know, your mom seduced me and I couldn't control myself." To Chrissie, her mother was always the "naughty parent," the one who was rebellious, who would drink at parties and had a sexual past. Her father was the virtuous one.

She described herself as preoccupied with sex in childhood, noting the plans she made to invite a little boy, Drew, to her house after school in order to "model" for him a sexy nightgown her mother had given to her for dress-ups. Calling herself "very bizarre," she wanted to appear before him, as if to say "Look. I'm so sexy." Although she was young, six, seven, or so, she knew at the time that this was a weird thing to want. She knew, or thought she knew, that other girls did not think like this, did not like to pose in sexy lingerie.

She remembered how she was drawn to the magazine section in bookstores to look at the photographs of scantily clad women on the covers of men's magazines. At home she and a neighbor girl would draw naked people with genitals showing, never embarrassed to show them to her mother, who would be "very accepting." Her father "would have gotten mad or he would have thought they were really dirty."

Her father's doubts framed the way she viewed her many sexual experiences. Her mother, for example, had gotten her sister and her *Where Did I Come From?*, a sex education book for children with cartoons and silly pictures. She and her sister were looking through it and giggling and her father came in and "got all mad because it was supposed to be something that was informative." It wasn't supposed "to be like pornography."

Chrissie defined her "weirdness," her deviance, almost totally in terms

of interest, not acts. For example, Chrissie was at a cousin's house and they discovered a hard-core pornography tape among the videos under the family room VCR. She remembered feeling obsessed:

Like I really wanted to watch the whole thing. It wasn't like, That's disgusting, let's turn it off. It was like, That's disgusting, let's keep watching it.

But we should remember here that she watched it with other children. In many of her stories she is not alone. So certain is she, however, that she is the deviant one, that she dismisses this fact.

Chrissie's deviance means something more to her than an interest in sex. It means that she's not like a real girl, but more like a boy. Girls aren't supposed to be interested in sex, she realized at an early age, and if they are, they are wicked.

I was a girl and I shouldn't want that. . . . It might not be so much either that I was a girl, but my dad wanted to raise good, healthy children that didn't want to watch pornography, so I was like, "Why do I want to?"

Again, Chrissie criticized herself for being too sexual:

I just feel that I have this list of all these sorts of things that I feel like are deviant or bizarre or violent. Why do I want to do that? I often find myself trying to figure out, What is the source of it? Why do I seem to have this much stronger desire for that than other people?

There is one incident that unfortunately confirmed to Chrissie that she was different from other girls. Like many other girls, she initiated a sexual game. But unlike most of the other stories about girl-to-girl sexual play and games, she was rejected. She asked a friend of hers whether they could play a game where they take off all of their clothes and pretend to be having sex.

I didn't know exactly how we'd do that. Maybe just wiggle around or whatever. I said, "I'll be the boy if you want or whatever."

Her friend said no, leading Chrissie to feel bad that she was the desiring one, the deviant one. Here Chrissie, like so many girls, equates desire

with deviance. If her friend had said yes (and we know from many other girls' stories that sometimes they do), she would have had a "partner in crime," a buddy, a chum.

The psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan, in *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry*, now a classic, wrote about how important a "chum" is to correct the self-images children develop about how weird and strange they are. With a chum who does everything with them, they never feel alone or isolated. Their chum reflects back to them that who they are, what they do, is thoroughly acceptable. In the following exchange, with a different girl, Chrissie began to feel better about herself, as if she were not alone or unusual.

The one time her great burden of guilt was lifted was in conversation with a friend who said she had found some porn magazines in a cabin in the woods. The friend asked Chrissie if she knew what the word "come" meant. Her friend seemed "obsessed" with that word—"come." Since Chrissie didn't know what it meant, the friend explained it to her. Then Chrissie confessed that she had once seen a movie and had seen "come" in this movie, although she hadn't known the name for it at the time.

It was really a freeing feeling to admit that, to know that I'd seen a porno magazine and that I could say that I'd seen a movie and I wasn't some sort of freak because of that.

Aside from that moment, Chrissie saw herself as a freak.

Not surprisingly, Chrissie asked me at the end of the interview whether or not she was deviant. I told her that there is a range of how sexual people are and how sexual they feel. That boys and girls both exist on the continuum. The problem is that we tend to think that girls are very low on this continuum and boys are very high. But men and women differ so much more in personality characteristics and temperament than they do by gender-stereotyped characteristics. There are some women and girls with a lot of sexual interest and drive and a lot of men with just a little. But when women have a lot, they think of themselves as deviant, especially the girls who are high on the continuum. They think of themselves as more malelike, more crazy, and more strange. They do not fit the mold of the asexual good girl in our culture. Chrissie seemed relieved after this explanation.

When women are sexual, men become afraid. Societies become afraid. It's as if the girl is usurping some essential form of male power. The sexual woman is seen as sucking out the vitality of the man, his prowess, his dig-

nity. That's why history has called sexual women temptresses and witches. In addition, that's why some cultures have formed practices such as clitoridectomy that ensure that women do not have sexual feelings.

Sex is power, and in a culture that doesn't explicitly take away a woman's sexual feelings, the backup strategy is to have the woman or girl learn to take them away herself, through guilt. I wouldn't want to say that Chrissie's guilt is as debilitating as a clitoridectomy, but it is certainly a presence that disempowers her and makes her less than she feels, less than she is.

Olivia: Weird Pleasures

Olivia, like Chrissie, thought she was a "weirdo" in childhood. Growing up in a rural, Rocky Mountain town, with only about thirty other children in the area, someone would have to be excluded. Olivia described herself as the only "ethnic" kid in the school, smart, musical, but also the "chubby girl who was black and stuff (actually of Hispanic/Native American heritage) and kind of sweaty and hairy."

Olivia said straight out: "Younger children do find things sensual. They do have a sex life." She has masturbated since the age of six, and more than anything else she did as a child, this made her feel the most guilty. It was pleasurable and, from an early age, she remembered she could even have orgasms. Once her mother walked in on her masturbating in front of the television. Her mother pretended that she didn't see what Olivia was doing, but for the next few days she wouldn't let Olivia watch TV. Olivia tried to talk to her mother about masturbating and what her mother saw that day. "Mom, I'm sorry for that," she said. But her mother claimed she hadn't seen anything. Olivia's mother taught her about shame in numerous ways; in Olivia's words, "she had a big history of being ashamed of your body."

Some would explain the sexual stories to come as resulting from several features in her environment: her mother was an alcoholic and neglected her after Olivia's sister died from cancer; her father encouraged her interest through dirty jokes and porn photos in his garage. Like Chrissie, Olivia may have been acting out a hidden conflict between one sexual parent and another, repressed and guilt-ridden. Children do pick up on the anxieties within marital relationships. But then again, they do have an interest in sexuality all their own.

Aside from her early experiences of masturbation, Olivia's first sexual

or sexualized experience occurred at a baby-sitter's house where she stayed after school, the year she was nine. The baby-sitter's youngest son loved to dress up in girls' clothing. Day after day the two would play dress-ups. The husband of the baby-sitter, who was the boy's father, home all day, would observe them, railing against his son for liking girls' clothes, but never stopping them. The two children would prance around in girls' dresses, feeling pretty and sexy, until once her friend asked to borrow her underpants. Though it upset her at first, she went with the flow of the game and began to try to help him by thinking up magic potions to turn him into a girl. The two friends were also curious about genitals and would arrange to play in a way that satisfied that curiosity. For example, they would put on dresses with big fluffy slips, and then do somersaults for each other without their underwear on, so that each could see the other's private parts. Only looking, no touching.

While Olivia was enjoying her sexual play with the boy her own age, his older brother would sometimes attack her. He would jump on her, wrestle her to the floor, and rub himself against her. This taught Olivia a different story about sex, a story that "wasn't fun." She doesn't remember feeling scared so much as "this is not right. . . . He had an advantage, and most of the time he was on top of me."

Older boys tend to teach different lessons and are more prone to exploit younger children. That is why, in advocating for a more relaxed atmosphere around childhood sexual play and games, it is important for parents to encourage same-sex play. In a small community such as Olivia's, she was exposed to older boys quite often. Riding the bus in first grade, for example, she would endure shouts from the high school boys such as, "What would you do if I made you suck my cock?" Never the shy one, she yelled back at them and said, "Yucccchhhh," and the bus driver yelled at them all to keep quiet. Though Olivia still felt this was abnormal, it didn't upset her and she didn't feel stigmatized, unlike her experiences with the older brother at the baby-sitter's.

Olivia had another friendship with a girl who she thought was kind of bizarre. This girl came from an athletic family, and so "they weren't big on keeping your body hidden or anything." One of her friend's favorite games was to get "totally naked" and play a pretend game of a policeman finding a naked person on the street:

The person who was supposed to be a police officer would catch the naked person and then start stripping himself.

She described the game as stimulating, but reassured me that she is heterosexual. Her assumption was that this kind of game with another girl defined her in some way as gay because she had sexual feelings during it.

She had another sexualized friendship at an earlier age, from about age six through seven, with a boy. When she would stay overnight at his house, their parents would let them sleep in the same bed. They would undress completely, and there was

a lot of feeling and groping and stuff like that . . . there was no giggling . . . and the next morning we'd wake up, and I remember one time we said, 'Oh, we were a little wild the other night.' It was so weird. It was bizarre, because we were six years old, and we were thinking all these thoughts, and we were like waking up the next morning looking at each other, going, I don't know if I can look at you.

What is interesting about this incident is the seriousness. If the children are serious, is it still play? Is it experimentation or real? For children it is both. Sometimes it is for adults as well. Sex and play have a lot in common.

When we read these examples from Olivia's childhood sex life, she begins to look like a fairly sexual creature. However, in this town of only thirty children, she certainly had numerous "partners in crime," boys and girls. Despite, like Chrissie, knowing other kids were doing the same things, Olivia still felt that she was odd.

As an adult today she compares herself to her roommate and sees herself as well adjusted. Her roommate, for example, who led a very sheltered life as a child and teen, is "going crazy" with the freedom of college, sleeping with a lot of guys, doing stripteases for college boys at parties.

I think all of the stuff being when you're younger actually helps you to be more well adjusted when you get older. . . . If anything comes up now [meaning if she gets physically excited by someone], you know that this is basically a biological response; it's no big deal.

Dorothy Jean: Murphy Beds and Femme Fatales

Dorothy Jean was the woman who needed to talk to me in her own home, who told me in advance that she had secrets to tell that nobody had heard previously. She wanted to find a time when her husband would be out. She

wanted a space that would be private. And, I think, she wanted me to see who she was and who she had been for the whole of her life before I heard the small, shameful parts that still loomed large in her mind.

While she was growing up, sex was all around Dorothy, although she didn't see it that way. She grew up in the 1940s in the Midwest in a three-flat (three apartments, one on top of the other); her aunt Mary, uncle Danny, and cousin Jim lived below her, and her grandparents lived above her. Her grandparents' apartment had a Murphy bed in the dining room that the children would pull down and play on. A Murphy bed is a bed that is stored upright, hidden in a cupboard. Open the cupboard, pull the bed down, and a room that you use for other functions during the day becomes a bedroom at night.

Dorothy remembered the day her grandmother and she were watching the streetcars go by in the rain, the sparks still igniting on the tracks, when they saw a woman holding an accordion faint, right at the stop in front of their house. Dorothy's grandmother ran out to the woman and brought her in, drenched and weak. She gave her a home, and the mysterious woman ended up sleeping in the Murphy bed the children loved to play on.

She was an accordion player and a singer and she was brilliant. And what we didn't know at the time . . . at night, she ended up working for my dad in his trio, and they would be, like, um, um, "hugging" in the Murphy bed, in grandma's dining room . . . he ultimately married her. Mom and Dad split up when I was nine. At nine, everything changed, just like that. Mom and Dad split up, we moved to an apartment on the other side of town, grandma died of a heart attack, Dad committed his life to this woman, and my whole life changed.

Her German grandfather played an important role in her life as she grew up; he kept detective magazines around the house, magazines with fictionalized true-crime stories, famous now for their covers. About the size of a *Reader's Digest*, these magazines had lurid drawings on their covers of beautiful women, scantily clothed, lying in a pool of blood or with a revolver near their limp hands. The women's dresses would pull against their bulging breasts; a bra strap or part of a slip would be exposed. Murdered and abandoned, they were both gruesome and sexual images.

And then there were the cousins. These cousins featured strongly in the sexual play that made Dorothy feel so guilty. Her grandfather had a

weekend farm where he would raise the chickens they ate. Relatives, whom Dorothy calls her "white trash cousins," lived at this farm. This is the family from which she learned the most about sex.

They were like a Jerry Springer show. You know, it was always like they were throwing and hitting, but very emotional and loving too, and very preoccupied with sex. I grew to look forward to these visits, and then I grew to mistrust them. The mother in this family was a leathery, very handsome, very charismatic, and very volatile sort of mountain woman.

Finally, in the world of Dorothy's childhood, there were the doctor's appointments. Dorothy had something "wrong" with her vaginal area. There was something in her "private area" that meant she regularly had to visit the doctor until puberty to have a growth that would continue to regrow cut away. This was never quite explained to her. While in the doctor's office someone would have to pull apart her labia while he would use a razor blade to cut off the growth. Dorothy used to fight them tooth and nail, but they would hold her down until the procedure was over. It hurt. And it was deeply shaming and embarrassing to Dorothy to have to do this: "If I see a man who resembles that doctor . . . that's something I never talk about."

In this context, Dorothy's sexual life began. And it began with her love of Wonder Woman. Transforming her abusive medical experiences into stories of power and agency, she would play at being Wonder Woman. Wonder Woman was tied up and tortured, and she needed to break away! She would pull and twist herself against the imaginary ropes that bound her until she could break free. Dorothy, all by herself, with a towel over her shoulders, imagined herself with a big chest and a tiny waist and long black hair, feeling totally sexual and powerful, fighting off her torturers with bravado.

At other times her anger over her medical appointments was enacted under a table she called her "zombie chamber." Here she would put Vaseline on her dolls' pubic areas and torture them.

The secret game, "Playing Dead," was different. She was not alone but played with her wild cousins a game they all called "Playing Dead." Two or three of the girl cousins from the country would come to their grandparents' apartment to visit, and in the Murphy bed, or in the back room of her grandparents' apartment, they would "play dead" just like the ladies on the

covers of the detective magazines. To begin the game, one of the cousins usually would say, "Do you want to play dead?" And then

one of us would tie up the other one, you know, in a provocative pose, and in various stages of undress. And then the other kids would go out of the room, and then the kid tied up would play dead, and then the other kids would come back in the room, and they'd say, "Oh, she's so beautiful." "Oh, look at her! She's so gorgeous!" "She's so beautiful." And you'd get this real sexual rush. It was very sexual. . . . I was posed very provocatively. . . . It was really titillating and fun, and it was a feeling because I was so physical.

And there it was. The secret game that she hadn't told anyone about all the forty-seven or forty-eight years since she had played it. A game that festered in shame within. But why? It may have been in response to the sexual pleasure she felt. Perhaps it was because she played with other girls. Maybe the fact that she was tied up made her feel as if she was deriving pleasure from something that was especially sexually decadent or deviant.

There are other games of "playing dead" that girls played together that other women I interviewed told me about. Dorothy was not the first. These kinds of games express girls' ambivalence about their sexuality. To feel anything sexual, they needed to be dead, or pretend to be dead. But with another's gaze, girls became the beautiful object of desire: sexual, untouchable, and at the same time both sexy and pure. Doesn't death, in fact, purify? Pretended death purifies the girl by transforming her from a sexual agent (one who desires) to a sexual object (one who is desired). It makes the wicked seductress into the sad, tragic beauty.

What is also interesting is that the words in the game created a sexual thrill in the child: "You hear someone's voice and your body tingles. It was great, actually, but not—it was naughty." Sexual pleasure, then, was learned through imitation, by being a beautiful, pornographic object. Sexual feelings arose from being admired.

This was the secret that Dorothy had kept from her husband, the one she didn't want anyone to hear. As she told it to me, the old pleasure came up again. She smiled when she told me how wonderful it felt to be admired, the shame evaporating for the moment. Reflecting on the times, the early fifties, Dorothy said to me, "Y'know, you don't have Oprah to say, 'This is normal; this is natural.' At the time, this was something shaming to me, and I was losing, at the time, everything I had."

Once she had a sleepover at about the age of ten with a girlfriend, so Dorothy taught her how to play this game. Then the girl's mother walked in and asked, "What are you doing?" Dorothy had no answer. It was bedtime, but the mother told Dorothy to get dressed, that she was taking her home. Dorothy's friend kept crying to her mother, "She won't be bad again. Let her stay. She won't be bad again, Mom."

As observers we are forced then to rethink what these games really are. Doesn't it depend on how the child feels it at the time? Does the child feel it as just a game? Rarely. Children never see themselves as "just children," excusing their actions by way of immaturity or childishness. They see themselves as full human beings who make choices, have feelings, and experience things heart and soul. So why should we expect anything different? At the time, Dorothy was sexually excited by playing with her female cousins. She turned out to live a heterosexual life, but that doesn't mean that her early impulse wasn't "real" or really her.

After she told me about her secret game, the power it held over her was gone. There's power and control in secrets. And if anyone believes that children should be left alone in their secret worlds to figure it all out, they should learn from Dorothy Jean:

Until I said it out loud, and I have never addressed it, ever . . . so I think, and here it gets a little complicated. I think that part of me allowed that game to have a power and allowed a part of me to continue to be shamed, and I could work that way. Now I have no excuse. It was a secret that now I don't have . . . so I have to love it, and bless it, and let it go. I am who I am, and I'm unique, and there's no one to punish and there's no one to blame. So I have to let it go.

So I'm normal, huh? I don't feel so bad.

Chapter 12

Too Sexual Too Soon

"I see no reason not to believe that soon a substantial number of youths will be having intercourse in the middle-school years. . . . It's already happening."

—Dr. Richard Gallagher, April, 2, 2000, as quoted in the *New York Times*,
"Sunday Styles" section

Some girls have sex before their teens. And while sexual exploration at an early age is fine, I see many problems with early sexual intercourse. Rather than contributing to a girl's understanding of herself as a sexual being in her own right, it orients her sexual development toward what she believes a man wants. It cuts off her own process of development and redirects her to another's. Aside from issues of pregnancy and emotional maturity, which are important issues in and of themselves, another consideration is that girls simply do not develop to be sexually secure when they have sex at an early age. Mothers and fathers are smart to try to shield their daughters from early sex, but in urging their daughters away from sexuality and supporting their dreams of romantic love, they inadvertently push them toward younger, male-oriented sex.

Early intercourse is a cultural practice that benefits boys more than it does girls. One minor reason is that most girls do not enjoy first sex. Many regret it, although boys obtain a higher status among peers from early sex. A more important reason is that girls do not learn to know their bodies better through first sex, nor do they experiment with their own feelings

through intercourse. It is often simply about pleasing their boyfriends. Look at the new trends for oral sex in junior high school. When journalists have investigated this trend they overwhelmingly refer to girls performing oral sex on boys rather than boys performing oral sex on girls. Sex research informs us that oral sex for women is one of the most pleasurable female sexual experiences. If early sex is not a male-centered experience, if it were being demanded by girls, wouldn't it have more to do with female sexual pleasure? Instead, it has more to do with the conferring of adult woman status on a girl by a man or boy through intercourse. In the *New York Times* article on the subject, boys say that oral sex is "fun" and they do it out of "curiosity." Girls are curiously silent on the subject.

The media panics about children having sex too early, yet constructs the idea of "too early" on experts' knowledge about child development, when a child should be doing what they are doing. Experts in the United States surprisingly seem to agree on what's "natural," even though what's natural certainly depends on what country and culture you are referring to. There is general understanding among therapists who see children that sex confuses a child and makes them vulnerable to powerful feelings they will have no control over or that will be too intense for them to sort out.

Psychologists who have worked with adolescents also believe that early sex is tied to exploitation. I certainly agree with this belief, particularly in the case of girls who, when they tend to have sex early, frequently are convinced to do it by older boys and men. This does leave them open to exploitation. Recent worries about girls reaching puberty early is more about the way they seem to attract older boys and men instead of the repercussions on health: "We already see how men look at Clara," one mother said to *Time* magazine about her daughter, who was eight when she began developing breasts.

The most important sanction against early sex is probably the fact that it isn't "play." When children play with children their own age there is a mutuality and equality that blesses the experience and which, if they take this into adulthood, would serve them well. But preteen sex rarely occurs in a play or exploratory context. For a girl it is often about being popular, submitting to an older boy, not losing a boyfriend, feeling wanted, or just about thinking one is becoming an adult woman. It is rarely about one's own body, feeling pleasure, or one's own sexual growth.

Until recently researchers believed that African-American girls are more likely to have sexual intercourse at an early age than white girls or Latinas. However, the increase over the past decade in early sex for white

girls is much greater than that of African-American girls. Furthermore, urban girls and white rural girls in general have sex earlier than suburban girls of any race. Deb Tolman, director of the Adolescent Sexuality Project at the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College, writes that when race and class are not confounded, differences between whites and Blacks almost disappear.

Yet there are differences. African-American girls' early sexuality is presented in the media as a threat to society—teen pregnancy, poverty, welfare mothers—and rarely as a risk to them. The early sex that has been reported of late in white middle-class junior high schools, however, is presented as a risk to the girls themselves. Here is yet another instance where we strive to protect white girlhood and condemn African-American girls.

It is clear that environment makes a difference for urban girls and poor girls from rural settings, where early sexual intercourse represents a lack of a protected space of girlhood. No one appears to be looking out for these girls' futures. Although the protected space sometimes makes problems for middle-class white girls in terms of the expectations to be a little lady or a real girl, in the case of preventing early sexual intercourse, it also has its rewards.

In *Streetwise*, the sociologist Elijah Anderson writes about the game young African-American teen and preteen boys play in which they feign love and caring or ambivalently express love and caring to a girl in order to get her to have intercourse. Anderson writes that the more a boy seems to exploit the girl he is after, the higher is his regard within his peer group because it shows others that he is in control. He takes pride in making a fool of the girl, while the girl underestimates peer group influences and hopes that he will stay true to her and remain by her side when she gets pregnant. She has bought into the notion of romantic love.

It has long been known that children (of any race) in homes with only one biological parent are more likely to engage in intercourse earlier than kids from homes with two biological parents. Anderson explains that girls in homes without a father are seen as coming from an "unprotected nest." They have no father that the boys are prepared to respect.

I don't mean to portray adolescent boys only as predators and teen girls as merely victims. But the lack of a protected space of girlhood for them, among so many other kinds of lacks, throws them into a game that has dire consequences and for which they have little preparation.

O'Brishia is one of those girls emblematic of the statistic that urban African-American girls have sex early. When I interviewed her, O'Brishia had just moved into the housing project where my assistant, Bev Colston,

and I did many of our interviews. She had come to this new city because her mother in New York City could no longer handle her, and because recently, while skipping school and hanging around with some boys, she was shot accidentally.

Her city neighborhood was rough. Even in the chase-and-kiss games of her Manhattan schoolyard, it wasn't just chase and kiss, it was chase and grab or chase and molest. The boys would try to grab as much of a girl's chest or butt as possible and squeeze as hard as they could. When O'Brishia talked about Juan, her first sexual partner, she said that she wished she had saved herself for her present boyfriend, Marvin. Even though she had been just eleven when she had sex with Juan, she had started menstruating already and was at risk for becoming pregnant. She said she had loved Juan, and that they used no protection, even though her mother had spoken to her about things like contraception.

It's not all that uncommon in O'Brishia's peer group to have intercourse at a young age. The truth-or-dare games we think of as being a regular part of middle-class girls' slumber parties take a different twist in this unprotected place of childhood. On O'Brishia's streets, truth-or-dare games can involve having sex with someone. I don't think she was putting me on. When I asked her if she played truth or dare and she said, "No. I did not want to kiss nobody or have sex with nobody or nothing." She wouldn't play because she "would never know what the person might say" for a dare. O'Brishia suggested that for some girls this could be the way they had their first experience with sex, through a dare: "They go in another room, but there had to be a witness." When I asked her if she thought this game was as much fun for the girls as for the boys, she said:

No, 'cause times when I made somebody do it and I had to watch it, I didn't know what they were doing and they didn't know what they were doing. The boys enjoyed it . . . sometimes the girls, friends of mine, would enjoy it, because I guess they knew what they was doing. But the boys, they swore they knew what they was doin'. Some girls didn't like it.

At first she answered by thinking about herself and how it wasn't fun for her having to watch the children she had forced to have sex through a dare. Then she considered some of the other girls and realized that for some of them, this initiation must have been confusing: "They didn't know what they were doing." These truth-or-dare games occurred in a space where adults either were not permitted or dared not go.

O'Brishia's mother is a single, working mother who has taken many

steps to put O'Brishia on the right track. Although O'Brishia was mad at her mother, I am more sympathetic. Trying to protect O'Brishia, she read her diary and found out she was having sex with her boyfriend. Then she started the process of getting O'Brishia out of New York.

She's like, "You already had sex! Yeah, you ain't goin' to school, you havin' sex." I'm like, "What are you talking about?" She like ripped the page out [from her diary], "Here we go! Right here." I'm like, "How do you know to read that?" and I just never kept one ever since.

O'Brishia's only regret about having sex so early was that she has a new boyfriend and wishes he were the first.

Is it possible in O'Brishia's case to acknowledge sexual agency and give her permission for her experimentation while at the same time acknowledging that she is at risk and being exploited when she has sex as an eleven-year-old with her sixteen-year-old boyfriend? Because she is eleven, is what she is doing play? Is it adult sex? Is it being abused? Any of these responses is in part correct, but not the whole story. She is playing at being an adult; she is being taken advantage of by an older boy who has more power; but she is more likely to be seen by others as having adult sex rather than playing or being abused, because she is in fact a girl from the projects of New York City.

When girls play they begin to project themselves into the future, envisioning themselves as teenagers and adult women, and it is then that they start to imagine a sexual life embedded in a romance. Before any boy has come along to join them in their exploration or exploit them for their own needs, girls connect adult sex with heterosexual dreams of romance. O'Brishia believes in her play that she is in love with Juan. As Sharon Thompson writes in *Going All the Way*, the association of sex with love may be girls' biggest vulnerability.

O'Brishia is also vulnerable because she lacks close supervision, due to the poverty in which she is growing up. Poverty hurts girls in specific ways, and Black girls have a legacy of being treated poorly in those conditions.

We Americans think we've come a long way from the days of slavery, where there was a sharp distinction made between the southern belle and the slave girl. The southern white girl was training to become a lady, and ladies were seen as delicate and genteel. She was sheltered and protected from the war, from male society, from all things brutal or unseemly. Slave girls were used to do heavy fieldwork; they weren't spared from the whip of

the master simply because they were small, or girls, or frail, or young. They were not "allowed to be girls."

There is no space for an Alice in Wonderland girlhood of tea parties and secret gardens in the housing projects I visited, not for the African-American girls, for the Puerto Rican girls, or for the white girls living there. Here the cramped quarters reflect the little psychological space available. After reviewing the lives of the middle-class girls and comparing them to their impoverished sisters, black, Latina, and white, I think it is the poverty that keeps certain girls out of that necessary protected space where little girls are cherished.

When girls have sex with a man or teenage boy early, the game they are playing is a boy's game, and sometimes even a man's game. It's not that middle-class white girls don't also play a man's game. It is true that the patriarchal overseeing gaze of the white man enters into the middle-class white girls' play and games through the girls' joyful enactment of being an object, stripteasers or sexy dates for men. They are playing out male fantasies in the hopes of becoming good objects for men. But they are playing out these fantasies in a space that permits trial and error without risk, and that incorporates their own enjoyment of looking at themselves.

Poor girls who grow up in the city also need this period of experimentation and play. Their mothers rarely talk to them about sex. The TV doesn't show many images of middle-class African-American, Latina, let alone poor Black, Latina, and white women being sexual in a positive way. A significant number of them have been touched or exploited sexually at young ages. With regard to African-American girls in particular, African-American feminist author bell hooks warns that white feminists have ignored the impact of abuse on the lives of African-American women and girls. What a period of play and experimentation provides abused girls is the chance to relive and redo their own sexuality in a more positive way.

Streetwise author Anderson writes, "The ignorance of inner-city girls about their bodies astonishes the middle-class observer. Many have only a vague notion of where babies come from. . . . Parents in this culture are extremely reticent about discussing sex and birth control with their children."

Lee Rainwater, the sociologist who wrote the classic book *And the Poor Get Children*, explaining that middle-class people cherish a fantasy of the lower classes as impulsive and self-indulgent, not hemmed in by prudery and constriction. However, the girls I listened to are much more prudish in a deeper sense of the word. Uneducated by their mothers about sex, they

yield control rather than take control over their sexuality to men whom they see as initiators and educators, and allow boys to define their own pleasures. While girls in mother-only households have intercourse earlier, girls whose fathers disapprove of early intercourse have intercourse later. Fathers, in their absence, play an enormous role in sending girls to other men for so-called sexual training.

Many girls who grow up in impoverished conditions conform to the status quo by believing that sex = intercourse. Meanwhile, the boys and men who instruct them take pride in the number of women they get, how often they get it, and the freedom from responsibility they establish in their relationships. Each bestows on men a certain kind of power. But it doesn't have to be that way. Imagine for a moment if women made up the rules of sex. What would people picture in their minds when they heard the word sex? What would be the essential component? What would "going all the way" mean? If it was based on women's pleasure, intercourse might be some side issue. Oral sex might be central: "going all the way" might mean something erotic that had to do with the whole body. It's hard to know, because we've all been living in a male-oriented sexual world. In spite of the limits to the collective imagination, a French feminist, Luce Irigaray, wrote about a powerful form of women's sexuality that celebrates its womanliness, a sexuality that doesn't define itself by intercourse or the single orgasm. She writes about multiple bodily places of pleasure and the capacity of women to find a deep sensuality and sexuality in these places rather than focusing on the vaginal hole, the site of intercourse or penetration.

When a girl introduces another little girl to sex, there is a possibility that they might grow up to have a different view of what sex is, a different view of what might bring them pleasure. Many of the adult women I interviewed who had masturbated as a child or had played sexual games said that when they grew up they were less curious and less rebellious, making better choices because of that experience. They weren't overwhelmed by the sexual feelings they felt.

By contrast, girls who grew up in the projects or in poor urban communities didn't play with other girls very often and were more vulnerable to prevailing societal and male views of sex and girls' role in it. We know so much about the negative outcomes of early pregnancy, but will anyone look at the question a different way? What happens, as bell hooks asks, to the girl who does not integrate her sexuality into a positive view of herself? Ask many dissatisfied adult women and they will answer: she becomes us.

Chapter 13

Unwelcome Intrusions: Sexual Coercion in the Lives of Girls

"Those were my little secrets I kept for years and years and years."

—Roxanne, African American, 38

Karen grew up in rural Vermont and likes to tell how she and her best friend would run up and down the beach, the wind in their faces, pretending to be Amazon women who could fight, run, do whatever they want. Would that all girls had such joyous freedom. There's a depressing reality of abuse and coercion that knocks the wind out of girls. Even though we want to acknowledge all the power and sexuality and assertiveness of girls growing up in the United States, this book would not be complete without also acknowledging the pain of abuse.

We live in an era during which it is easier for women to tell each other about their sexual victimization than their sexual delights. Way too many girls are sexually abused or harassed during their grade school years. For some, the abuse is so traumatic or long-lasting that it precludes any experience of sexual play and games in childhood. For a few girls, abuse and mutual sexual play existed side by side, and they knew the difference.

Dealing with Boys' Entitlement

Some incidents in elementary and junior high school knock the wind out of girls. When I was in the fifth grade, I was pushed down by a group of boys

and held down on my back in the snow while another group of boys pushed Jeffrey Omar on top of me and made him kiss me. The girls in the class who were my friends just watched as I fought and yelled, "Get off of me." I went in to school that day crying and angry. I guess that's why I expected, as an adult, to hear that chase-and-kiss games were games of harassment, showing boys' entitlement. I was surprised to find that they weren't games of harassment to most kids; the majority enjoyed the game.

Even though it does not occur frequently in the chase-and-kiss games of childhood, boys' entitlement is present early. Research documents boys taking over the use of science equipment in coed classes. It records mothers of preschoolers making their little girls share toys with others more often than they make their little boys share. In this climate, boys develop early an attitude of entitlement toward girls and sex. This is not exactly the "rapist mentality" that feminists have shown "normal" men to exhibit through their belief in rape myths; it is an imitation of it at a lower frequency. For example, one boy in a junior high in Ohio chased Gina and told her he would kill her if she wouldn't go steady with him. "So I did," she said.

Elenora, who grew up in New York City with her mother, an emigrant of Puerto Rico, was chased every day by a little boy who "scared the hell out of" her, yelling, "I'm going to get you." After her mother talked to authorities at the school, Elenora learned, "It turned out that he liked me and that was his way of showing he wanted attention." Amazingly, this behavior became more acceptable when the adults heard why he was doing it. It was as if the adults no longer could look at the experience from Elenora's perspective after they were given the perspective of the boy: he "did it out of love."

Laura was sexually harassed in the second grade. There was a boy in her class who she said was "very sexual" and, like the little boy in Elenora's story, he decided he liked Laura.

And he would like say he wanted to fuck me and he wanted to hump me and he would chase me around and tell people he wanted to [do that to me]. And I got really upset.

Her mother called this boy's mother, who said, "Oh, he's very precocious." The mothers left it at that.

Danielle, an African-American teenager I spoke to, talked about a boy who continually pressured her to sleep over with his sister so that he could get to her at night in his own home.

He was my brother's friend—he liked me a lot. . . . We moved there when they [my brother and he] were in the third grade and we [his sister and I] were in fourth, and he used to cuss me all the time, and I was wondering why. . . . Boys just don't understand some things. . . . And that's why I wouldn't spend the night at her house, because he'd always want me to, but I'm, like, "No."

To grown-ups these incidents are often cute. In the minds of many grown-ups, they already see boys as the chasers and girls as the unwilling victims, but they also find it adorable when kids act out these roles. Adults seem to be especially proud of their boys. To girls, this harassment is annoying and sometimes upsetting. Robin, the girl who spied on her teacher going to the bathroom, recalled that in the fourth grade a boy pulled up her skirt so that the whole class saw her underwear.

I was really mad about that and started crying. And I didn't really know what to do. And he just laughed, and I think I told the teacher.

Felicia also suffered from the liberties boys would take with their sexually charged behavior. Left in the care of her popular sister, Felicia would go with her to the shopping center, where the clusters of boys she and her sister passed intimidated her. She dreaded this.

And they'd say little things or they'd try to touch me the way they would touch my sister. I'd find myself having to fight and run, and I just hated it. It was not something I ever wanted.

Like Felicia, May recalled being frightened by boys. A white woman in her thirties, she told a terrifying story of a group of boys ganging up on her and her friends when she was in fourth grade. Asked if she remembered a time when kids forced her to do anything she didn't want to do or when she felt uncomfortable about a sexual experience, she answered:

[Some boys] took us off, and they wanted us to take our clothes off, and this is a friend of my brother's, who I actually sort of had a crush on. It was his neighborhood friends, and they took us off into the woods, and I remember being very upset by that. . . . I was about nine . . . and it was such a yucky feeling of being forced, you know, to take off your—and we went off in the woods together under some other pretense, and they were like, "Okay, now you have to take down your pants." And I

remember crying. And they said, "You have to take down your pants."
 . . . And I just remember I did that.

Overwhelmingly, the women and girls I interviewed said that when they entered junior high school the harassment continued. During a game of Choo Choo with the boys, the boys would keep trying to "hold your butt," Valerie said, and the girls would have to fight them off.

In Becca's junior high, the girls never wore white T-shirts, because after lunch the boys would throw water on the girls to have their bras or chest show through their shirts. Unfortunately, this kind of thing, like much recess harassment, was tolerated by the school.

Today, sexual harassment, defined unfortunately broadly as anything sexual said or done that makes the other feel uncomfortable, is regulated to prevent this kind of play in the school. Nevertheless, the idea that boys chase the girls and girls chase the boys so all is well is used sometimes to dismiss the scarier kinds of attacks that boys make on girls. While not technically sexual abuse, these incidents not only threaten girls, but also make sexuality dangerous. They are upsetting, angering, and humiliating for girls, yet somehow boys feel entitled to chase, push, grab, insult, and pressure the girls in their classes and schools.

Child-to-Child Abuse: It Happens

A whole new variety of sexual abuses have been discovered in which children are the perpetrators. Sometimes children who themselves have been abused act out and force other kids to experience the hardships they had to. Freud explained such a repetition of past trauma as attempts to master what happened to them by modeling themselves after the aggressor. Many experts who work with sexually abused kids label these children as "sexualized," as if to imply that normal children are not. Vermont, among other states, has instituted a special group therapy (the STEP program) for kids who have been caught abusing other kids. Despite my preconceptions, when I heard stories of these kids who are sent to group therapy for sexualized behavior, I wondered whether what the kids have been caught doing should really be called abuse.

It's hard to decide what is abuse when sex occurs between kids unless one of the children is coerced or upset. That doesn't mean that sexual abuse by kids on kids doesn't occur; it does. But in my interviews I heard about several incidents which defied simple categorization.

Vicky, one of the few Asian-American women I interviewed, told me of an incident at her baby-sitter's house, when she was forced to take a bath with the baby-sitter's granddaughter, who was a bit older than her:

[The other girl] would ask me, you know, "Do you have this?" And she would show me hers, and the first time it wasn't, you know, but then, be-cause we were there everyday. . . . One day we took a bath together, and I guess she was just showing me hers, and I felt really weird, but then of course I was naked too, so she saw me too and, like, she touched me there. And it was just, you know, it felt weird. That it wasn't right.

Vicky felt "very ashamed afterwards, like I was always happy to get out of that place." When I asked if the girl made her do things she wasn't comfortable with, she replied, "No, it wasn't that she forced me, but I felt, I don't know, I felt like I had to or something. I felt like I had to. And I felt really dirty, very ashamed."

In many ways this story bears similarity to the many stories I heard about showing and touching that were pleasurable. The only difference was that Vicky didn't really want to do it and felt in some way compelled to. Perhaps this is a story without a perpetrator, because one child simply was ignorant of the other's discomfort while she tried to indulge her own sexual curiosity. Nevertheless, Vicky still sounds like a victim. She recalled that she felt "dirty" and "ashamed." She didn't really want to do those things after the first time, but she felt that she had to. Furthermore, she was "always happy to get out of that place." It was the only example of possible girl-to-girl abuse that I heard in all of my discussions.

In another interview, Charise talked about an experience with a male cousin that was abusive, though her description presents her as having some control. Professionals today would categorize this as abuse, and by making Charise only a victim, they would focus on her feelings of discomfort and ignore her remembered feeling of agency.

I remember this same cousin who was related to my grandfather, he had me going in the backyard, and pulled my panties down, and I was standing in front of him. He was standing behind me. And I guess he was just grinding on me, but it was something that I didn't really want to do, but I think I did it to make him happy or something. He was one of my favorite cousins. . . . I knew it wasn't right but it was just something that he wanted to do.

Like Charise, Maura was involved in a situation that most professionals would call abuse, but she seems to have come out of it particularly healthy and unscathed. She grew up in a loving family in the suburbs of Los Angeles, a great neighborhood with lots of kids around. Among them was a boy who lived nearby, who was fifteen when she was ten. Maura recalled that

my parents trusted him, and he was our baby-sitter, and he was very free. He taught us a lot of things. He was kind of the older boy that everyone looked up to, and we would put our things out in the backyard during the summer and all sleep out there, and that summer he started coming, messing around a little bit . . . and it was all very innocent.

At first they would "smooch and stuff" and later on they would start "going to the bodies a little more." Though this relationship lasted nearly two years, they never did

any big stuff. You know, we never had intercourse, but we just messed around with each other's bodies, and we looked at each other and touched each other. And he knew more than I did. So, I mean, he taught me some things that I think I was much too young to know.

Professionals would say that her youthfulness is the crux of why it was abusive. As the older, much admired boy in the neighborhood, he not only knew much more but also had a certain amount of power over Maura. In the interview, Maura claimed, "I don't think it damaged my psyche that much . . . but it definitely changed how I looked at the world." She had mixed feelings: "I did feel some shame about it, because I knew that it wasn't, that my parents would not be happy about it, but at the same time I was so intrigued and excited about it."

Although this was a potentially harmful situation, there can be abuse with no harm. It may be that there is some hidden harm that she doesn't acknowledge or which has yet to emerge. However, girls can make use of such experiences, reframing them in useful ways. Comparing the gentle two-year-long exploratory introduction to sex to the sometimes rough introduction to sex some girls get on their first date with a "bad" kid in high school, suggests that Maura, though abused, was not as bad off as some. Despite the way the relationship may have interfered with Maura's other childhood activities, and despite the assumption that the fifteen-year-old

should not have done this, in her mind Maura's first experience with sex was still a relatively positive one.

Looking back, Maura clearly differentiated this experience from another experience she had with a boy when she was thirteen. In it, she was briefly trapped by another boy in her neighborhood: "He chased me around, but I got out of it. I escaped. He wanted to have sexual contact with me, but I got away from him. That was an experience!"

The above examples should not give reason to believe that child-to-child abuse is usually an innocent mistake easily gotten over by its victims. Nor does it mean that all women or girls will recognize the abuse either as it is happening or in retrospect. In fact, several children had intercourse at ages that, no matter how mutual, create more psychological questions and worries than they answer.

Roxanne, who was nine the first time she had sex, remembered:

Oh yeah, my brothers had the cousins come over and stuff, and they used to abuse me. . . . I was eight or nine and they actually had intercourse [with me]. Those were my little secrets I kept for years and years and years.

Bev, who interviewed Roxanne, was shocked when she heard about it. She asked, "Did they force you? Did you know what was going on?"

Oh, it was attention. It was attention, so I knew that they liked me. You know? As far as I knew, they were my special friends. . . . I didn't like myself very much because of the things I would do. . . . I knew it was wrong, but it was a way to . . . [then her voice trailed off]

Though she described her cousins as her "special friends," Roxanne also described the harmful repercussions of these encounters: "But it did so much damage, though. It did. It really did a lot of damage as far as relationships with men. No respect for them. Not no respect but, I treat them now like they treat women. That's how I treat them."

Despite the remarkable catalog researchers have collected both on children and on sexuality, we know too little about the combination of the two to know who would come out of such an experience "damaged" and who would come out fine. Girls certainly are at risk. Studies show that girls who have higher rates of intercourse at twelve have higher emotional distress; the same is not true of boys.

Robin, the African-American college student from an upper-middle-class home in the Washington, D.C., area, had a strange experience with the brother of a friend that most professionals would conclude was abusive.

I remember one time, I was eight and he was thirteen. Emma left the room and he was, Robin, can you get my keys out of my pocket of my jeans? And, like I went in and he had a hole in his pocket, so like I really felt, really, really weird. . . . So, I mean, he sounds like a big pervert. And I can't really think of any other time when he was like perverted to me. . . . And at the time I did it, and then I was, like, oh, what is that? . . . But then I realized, and then I felt like really weird and bad, and then I never like talked, like I never was comfortable around him.

Psychologists who work with sexual abuse victims easily see this as an abusive experience, tricked as she was to feel this boy's penis. The betrayal and shock are more salient than what might be called the prankishness of the incident. Robin's shock and discomfort make it easier to label this relatively minor incident abuse, and yet more difficult to clearly define abusive those experiences of sex that other girls had that were not traumatic. For example, Toni, who pretended to be asleep when her cousin entered her room to have sex with her, or Maura, who spent all that time with the fifteen-year-old baby-sitter, although abused, appear less like stereotypical victims because of their understanding and agency at the time of the sexual acts.

Those clinicians who work with sexual abuse victims might say I am blaming the victim. But I think I am just recognizing that in some cases of abuse, girls feel as if they had some choice. It's not as if these experiences are not abuse, but they are something else too. The bottom line is choice. The white, middle-class girl who explored her sexuality with her fifteen-year-old friend—even though he was much older than she—felt she had choice, control, and a degree of mutuality in the situation. It was at her speed, if a little advanced. Roxanne, with her problematic family and her desperation for affection, made a choice too, but it was a more coerced choice than Maura's. Instead of participating equally, she allowed the older cousins to abuse her because she felt it was her only option. She still feels the aftershocks of those days.

Valerie, the African-American woman who was six when her fifteen-year-old cousin started touching her, said:

I was young, but he used to come over and I used to sit on his lap, and you know how you wiggle and play, stuff like that. You don't know much about it, and I remember one time he touched my vagina and we just kept playing and I didn't think that much of it. But then he'd always give me money and stuff like that. But I felt he was so nice at the time that I always let it go. Then, maybe like a month or so later, he would come over and the same type of thing would go on, and he did it again. . . . I'd say about four or five times that may have happened, but there was always money and stuff involved. It happened really quickly.

Once, when she was playing with all the boys and sitting spread-legged on the top of a bunk bed, he came right over and

put his hand in, and he stuck it in my vagina, and I remember so clearly saying to him, "Don't do that. That hurts! You shouldn't be doing that," and I remember my brother Jay and somebody, they said, "What are you talking about?" And then as quickly as he said that my cousin kind of said, "You know, here, you want some money?" . . . And we went on playing.

When she got older, she realized these incidents were abusive, but she never brought it up with her cousin, whom she still sees.

Despite the abusive nature of Valerie's interactions with her cousin, she doesn't feel particularly harmed by that part of her past. In retrospect, she especially dislikes the money aspect of it, though it explains to her why she didn't mind so much at the time. In addition, she was able to stick up for herself one of the times, setting a boundary for her cousin.

The matter of choice and control means as much to girls as it does to women. It was certainly coercive when a neighborhood teenager asked Caroline at the age of eight or nine to give him her panties or let him feel her chest (a choiceless choice). But to her mind, she was "curious," and so she let him. Now, as a woman in her forties, she thinks she was abused, but she didn't experience it as abuse at the time because, as she puts it, "I had a choice."

It is very clear that when there is no choice, and when control is taken away from a girl, the abuse is more terrifying and the trauma more long-lasting. Vicky was pushed into a broom closet in the seventh grade by a boy at school who felt her up:

I like started to cry, and it was just so, but the weird thing was—I couldn't scream! I couldn't scream, I couldn't do anything.

She was frozen by terror and still feels bad about this incident.

Julia, molested by a group of boys in an alley who ripped her clothes off and felt her up and down until she escaped, wasn't frozen, but she was still traumatized by that event. She continued to see her perpetrators on the street afterward, but she never told anyone. Brenda, another Puerto Rican woman, had to fight to escape a boy trying to undress her in her own house when she was a girl.

The girls who got to play games of mutual delight and exploration with girls seemed to have been the lucky ones. Girls who hung out with boys were in riskier situations. Sometimes these girls could play games of mutual interest, but boys frequently chased, humiliated, abused, and hurt them. While there is much to be admired in the sexual assertion and fun that girls have behind closed doors in childhood, we also shouldn't forget the harassment and abuse that many, over a quarter of the women and girls I interviewed, also experienced.

They aren't all victims. Girls learn about sex in many ways, from the choices they make and from the abuse or harassment they encounter. Some come away fine and happy; the ones who fared the worst were the ones abused by adults. These experiences were in many cases more confusing or frightening for the children, and continue to make me so much more angry on behalf of all the girls it happened to.

Sexual Abuse of Girls

Clearly, an adult should not have sex with a child. Even if a child is willing. When a child is confused, when she feels complicit because she has sexual feelings, the shame and trauma sometimes are greater. Some of the girls or women I interviewed were abused by grown men: Cora by her uncle, Denitra by her mother's boyfriend, Jennifer by her grandmother's boyfriend, Annette by her grandfather, Lucy and Yolanda by men living in their apartment buildings. There was June, the oldest woman interviewed, who bent over to pick something up in an alley, when a man came over and tickled her bottom. She turned around and scolded him, "That's not very nice!" and that was that.

About 15 to 20 percent of the women and girls I interviewed talked

about some kind of sexual harassment or abuse. Unfortunately, this kind of experience for girls is not uncommon. Research shows that, for at least half of them, they will continue to suffer long-lasting effects, such as depression, anxiety, problems in relationships, low self-esteem, eating disorders, drug addiction, and more. On the bright side, girls do not always fit the typical victim mode: sometimes they freeze and are silent and never tell; other times they tell people, avoid their perpetrators, and even yell at them, "That hurts!" or "That's not very nice!"

But just because abuse and harassment are so prevalent in the lives of girls does not mean that our protection of them needs to keep them away from all things sexual or from boys. If parents can emphasize mutuality and respect as well as the notion of play, girls may be less vulnerable to adult male predators. Raising girls to understand sexuality and to understand their bodies, to make their own choices and to feel their own power, will serve them well in this sometimes dangerous world, and help them to preserve a small area in which they can develop and feel their own sexual potential.

Chapter 14

*Raising Sexual Girls:
A Few Words to Parents*

“all other passions pale into insignificance.”

—From “What Every Girl Should Know,” a series of articles for *The Call*, written by early feminist Margaret H. Sanger in 1912, but confiscated by postal officials on grounds of obscenity

“We may have to learn to let our sexual feelings come without our judgment or control and accept them as part of ourselves.”

—Boston Women’s Health Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, 1971

“Sex is people communicating with their bodies. . . . Sex is play.”

—Deal With It!, 1999

Few women are satisfied with the sex education they received, either in school or in relationships. Although these experiences are something that adult women laugh about today, few take the next step of envisioning a different process for their daughters. This passivity could mean that we as adults are comfortable leaving girls’ sex education to TV, adolescent boys, booklets distributed by Kotex, or websites that advocate a wild, male-oriented sexuality that in the end could leave them feeling vulnerable and ashamed. But most parents would disagree. The problem is that even adults are not sure what constitutes a good sex education. But if we begin to think this through together, I believe we would agree that we want girls to know their bodies, to understand pleasure, to gradually grow in their de-

velopment so that puberty does not attack them with a vengeance, and to love themselves as sexual beings.

To this end, adults need to let girls explore the range of human potential even when it means letting them play sexually. I see nothing wrong with two eight-year-olds closing the door to the bedroom, stripping down, and playing “puppet-talk” with the lips of their vaginas (true story!). Nor do I see anything wrong with a group of ten-year-old girls pretending to make out with each other, taking turns going into a closet. Nor is there something wrong with a game of house that incorporates a little humping. This is practice, this is experimentation, and it is also “real” sex—real to the children who play it.

For those girls who have been given that wonderful, protected space of play, this kind of play is happening already—there’s really no need to advocate for it, only a need to help them to not feel so guilty. While sex isn’t and shouldn’t be the main focus of childhood, it is part of life, and as a part of life it will enter into the games many children play. Adults only need to watch out for feelings of shame and guilt and bullying and coercion.

As in any activity in childhood, coercion, bullying, forcing, and teasing is wrong in sexual play. Just as it would be questionable for a child to actively and compulsively pursue playing sex games with all the children in the neighborhood, it would be wrong for a child to force another child in any way to participate in any of these kinds of games. Still, just because there are problem versions of sexual play and games doesn’t mean that all sexual play is harmful to children.

Parents may wonder how to know when enough is enough or when it is okay to simply close the bedroom door and walk away. Closing the door does not mean dropping the subject. A parent might close the door that afternoon and, in the evening, ask her daughter about the game: “Was it okay with you? Are you having fun? Are you enjoying yourself?” or, as one mother yelled in to her daughter, “Don’t do anything you’ll be ashamed of!”

If a parent knows her daughter is easily led, passive, and desperate for friends, she might have a right to worry and wonder whether her daughter enters such games mutually. If her daughter is playing with an older child, a mother has a right to worry whether the older child is taking an interest in her daughter for the wrong reasons and introducing her daughter to concepts she herself would not readily be interested in at that age. This kind of monitoring goes on for all sorts of play, not just sexual, and a parent

who is on the ball monitoring her or his daughter's play in other areas will be well prepared to ask the right questions with sexual play.

These are just a few of the ways adults can help girls feel good about their sexual interests and feelings:

- Accept her as a sexual being, from birth through the grade school years, and, of course, thereafter.
- Rather than taking a moralistic approach to a sexuality of do's and don'ts, parents should explicitly assert that sex is normal and a natural part of life; the same for sexual feelings.
- Take a moral approach and emphasize that any relationship, sexual or otherwise, is one built on fairness, respect, and caring for the other.
- Create an atmosphere in which sex can be discussed, not only in the sense of gathering information, but in the sense that it is a part of life.
- Respond frequently to sexual messages on TV in front of your child if your child sees them. Kids observe people joking about sex on TV, adults joking about wanting it and getting it and holding out. It's a limited and unimaginative way to be exposed to sexuality, quite devoid of sensuality, and shouldn't be left undiscussed. Talk to children about what's missing in all the joking about sex. Talk to daughters especially about the portrayal of romantic sex on television and in the movies. For instance, a mother can say about a made-for-TV movie, "They make it seem like a girl wants to be treated roughly, but I would think most girls want to be treated tenderly and asked if everything is okay." Or she might say about a prime-time drama, "They make it seem like she's wild with passion, but most girls when they first meet someone are unsure and want to take things slowly."
- Be proactive about the sex education programs in your community schools. Ask for curricula that talk about sexual feelings, pleasure, interpersonal relationships.
- Let them play. Ask about their play. Ask about their comfort level when they play with certain kids. Be sensitive to their relationships with other kids. If she is generally able to have mutually satisfying play that's nonsexual, then she is probably all right with sexual play.
- Always teach your child about coercion and bullying and how to stand up to it. Teach her to recognize when someone is interested in her for herself and when it's something else they want.

The erotic is a "resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane," wrote the poet Audré Lorde. These days, Americans often confuse it with the pornographic or the superficially sexual. But children need to move through and work through these competing images to come to some satisfying knowledge of their own place in this lively world.

Secrets and sexual secrets are not all bad. The best secrets of childhood are the ones a child keeps while knowing that in some sense her parents already know, to some extent, what's going on. Shameful secrets corrodes a girl's love of life, her longing to be a part of things, and her spirit of adventure. While I don't know all the answers about how sex and sexuality can be a part of girls' lives, I do know that it already is for many girls, and we would do well to acknowledge that fact and lend our support to the healthy development of sexuality they seek.