

Chapter Seven

... And Now About Sex

Geezer sex, once a bad joke, an idea that made us squirm uncomfortably—*old people doing it!*—is now the topic of the day, with ads featuring older people looking soulfully into each other's eyes as they make their way to the nearest bed. Of course, the people in the ads never *look* like any old person we know. Sure, there's a line here, a brow that isn't perfectly smooth, a little gray at the temples, just enough so we'll know they're supposed to be like us. But they're always tall, slim, fit, and handsome, no bags or sags or drooping bellies, no cares or canes, just the wonderful anticipation of sexual joy.

We're surrounded with sexual imagery, reminded of what we must be missing if we're not living in some kind of inspired sexual ecstasy. Magazines, newspapers, and the Web publish hundreds, if not thousands, of articles about sex each month, while films show aging stars like Jack Nicholson and Diane Keaton happily getting it on.¹ Bookstore shelves are lined with uncounted numbers of volumes ranging from scholarly treatises to breezy self-help books that advise us of the need to be inventive if we're to keep the sexual fires burning, instruct us on what to do and how to do it, assure us that anything goes so long as it's consensual, and promise a lifetime of sexual pleasure if we only fol-

low the rules. And just in case we're not already anxious enough, they provide self-tests so we can judge how we're doing.

For those of us who long ago left the hot sexual fires of youth behind, there are special messages and advice on how to recapture that time. Not that anyone asks whether that's something we want. Sure, some women would like to feel more sexually vigorous, and some men may yearn for the time when they walked around in a near-perpetual state of sexual readiness. But even they will likely agree that, as one sixty-eight-year-old man remarked, "We knew how to screw; we didn't know what the real thing was then. For that you have to grow up."

Or as a divorced sixty-two-year-old male friend, reflecting on Gail Sheehy's *Sex and the Seasoned Woman*,² writes: "I don't know about those women Sheehy writes about who are so hot to trot. I think anyone past fifty learned long ago that hot sex doesn't last as long as a good conversation, and that's what I want now before I go to bed with a woman. So if they're really out there, they better brush up on their social skills. The other stuff may come later, or it may not, but it's sure not the first thing on the plate for me and a lot of other guys."

Plug "sex in old age" into Google, and, depending on the day, you'll come up with somewhere around 40 million hits; change the search word to "Viagra" and it returns a whopping 60+ million, many of them extolling the wonders of sex in old age—now delicately labeled "mature sex"—along with thousands of ads offering pills that promise a "rock hard erection" that will put "man" back into manly. But buyer beware: call your doctor at once if that erection lasts for more than four hours.

There's no pill yet for women, but not to worry. There's a plastic surgeon around the corner who will be happy to rejuvenate the vagina and make it as tight and pink and welcoming as—yes, that's right—when we were young.

"Can you imagine having surgery to tighten your vagina?"

gasped a seventy-six-year-old woman I spoke with. "I saw it on that TV program about plastic surgeons who do things like that. I think we must be going crazy."

Commenting on the Viagra phenomenon, Dr. Abraham Morgentaler, a practicing urologist and member of the Harvard Medical School faculty, writes about the fantasies Viagra let loose and how detached they are from the complexity of human sexuality.

Viagra quickly tapped into a set of wishful fantasies that mirrored our culture's hunger for certainty and a quick fix. Supported by stories that described elderly men restored to such sexual vitality by Viagra that they abandoned their wives in favor of younger women, a conventional wisdom arose that Viagra was a fountain of youth, a sure cure, the real deal. Baby boomers could now look forward to fabulous sex well into their nineties. . . . But there is clearly more to the story of human sexuality and relationships than the Viagra Myth would have us believe.³

Or to paraphrase a famous Clinton-era slogan: "It's the relationship, stupid!" A lesson the old learned long ago as they look on in wonder: *Who can they possibly be talking about?* Remember when it used to be fun? we say to each other. Remember when we didn't have to think about it, plan for it, work so hard at it? we ask each other, while wondering silently if something is wrong with us because, while others are allegedly aching for sex, we're mostly content with a hug and a cuddle.

I read the media tales about the rollicking sex in nursing homes and wonder where they come from. This isn't to say that no one in a nursing home ever has sexual intercourse, or that men and women of any age don't yearn for intimate touch and reach out for it when they can. But swinging sex? I don't think so.

What I hear most often from older people whose partner is

no longer with them is not that they miss sex itself, but that they feel deprived of the physical closeness, of not experiencing the other's touch anymore.

"I used to think I missed sex and, I don't know, I guess I did; I mean, after all, it's a big thing to lose," says a seventy-eight-year-old man who's still mourning his wife's death two years earlier and whose own health is fragile. "It's maybe the hardest thing about getting old, not being able to perform so well anymore—or maybe not at all. But now that she's gone, all I really miss is her body next to mine; the bed's empty. I miss being able to reach out and touch her and, you know, being touched by her. I never knew how important that part was until I didn't have it anymore. I just miss having somebody to hold."

How is it that the people who write a different story about sex and aging don't talk to the same people I do? The sixty-nine-year-old woman who says, "I have to say I don't miss sex at all and feel relieved not to have to do it, although occasionally I do fantasize about the past and future—but not enough to call it missing." Or the seventy-four-year-old man whose prostate cancer left him impotent and who confesses, "It's funny. My body doesn't feel bad about not being able to do it, it's all up here," he says, pointing to his head. "I guess you could say it's sort of a relief in some way not to have to worry about performing anymore."

Where do they find the seventy-five-year-old men who, secure in the knowledge that the plumbing will always work, can't wait to jump into the sack? Or the women who, they tell us, blossom sexually in midlife and continue to flower through old age? Why do they feature stories about the seventy-something woman who advertises on an Internet dating site that she's seeking partners with whom to explore her sexuality, as if she were typical? Not that such women don't exist. They do, and I can add to those tales: women who come into their own in their later years, who

never knew sexual fire in their youth and find it lit in their middle years. But seventy-five-year-old women yearning for sex? Well, maybe, but I've never met one, certainly not one who's living in a long-term marriage.

I realize, as I write these words, that others can ask the same question: Why don't *I* talk to the same people *they* do? The answer is: I do. But after more than three decades of interviewing people about sex, I know how hard it is for them to speak honestly about their sex lives, how likely they are to put a glossy finish on the story because it's a better fit with cultural expectations—and perhaps with the expectations of the interviewer—than their own experience. Who, in a nation that glorifies sex as the ultimate high, that has ratcheted up sexual expectations far beyond anything that's reasonably sustainable, wants to be the one to talk about sexual disenchantment or disinterest?

My experience, therefore, is that if you take the time to probe beneath the surface, even the good-news stories get far more complicated than the media representations. And what's more, there aren't many of them. So while tales of sexual athleticism at eighty may make younger people feel better when they contemplate their own future, I don't think it's wise to let the few speak for the many. Such distortion of what's real in the world, of what people can expect as they age, leads to the kind of confusion, disappointment, and self-doubt so many aging people experience. It's corrosive in any arena of living, but worse so in sex because it's the one thing, even more than money, that most people are reluctant to talk about.

Researchers into marriage and family life long ago discovered that each member of a family writes its biography differently and that husbands and wives often have what one prominent sociologist long ago labeled "his and her marriage"⁴—one marriage, two different stories to tell. Nowhere is this truer than in the sex-

ual arena, and nowhere is that reality portrayed more eloquently than in the 1977 film *Annie Hall*, with Woody Allen playing a character named Alvy and Diane Keaton playing his longtime, live-in partner, Annie. In this memorable scene, they're each in their therapist's office, each bringing to the session their complaints about the other, while we, the audience, watch the action in both places on a split screen.

Alvy's therapist: "How often do you sleep together?" Alvy, lamenting: "Hardly ever. Maybe three times a week."

Annie's therapist: "Do you have sex often?" Annie, annoyed: "Constantly. I'd say three times a week."

Alvy and Annie were probably around forty, but adding years doesn't seem to do much to change the script, since I heard the same dissonance about sex between husbands and wives in this study. Among the older people, however, it's complicated by within-group differences, since sexual activity, especially intercourse, generally drops off in each decade from sixty-five through the nineties. While the heat of passion may be waning, the young old, those closer to sixty-five than seventy-five, are the most likely to continue to engage in a variety of sexual behaviors. After seventy-five, it slips a little more each year until the eighties, when it's generally all over but for the memories.

But no matter what the age, when I spoke with both partners in a marriage, there were likely to be distinct differences in the way they described their sexual experience, sometimes sounding as if they weren't in the same bed at the same time.

"I don't know about sex," demurs a sixty-nine-year-old woman, leaving me puzzled and waiting for the words to follow. "I mean, I sometimes think it's a lot more trouble than it's worth. My husband's having trouble, you know, I mean, he wants to but then he can't, and he feels terrible. I try to help him, you know, doing things that used to turn him on; sometimes it works and a

lot of times it doesn't. So now, I'd be just as happy not to bother anymore, and even though he complains a lot, he feels the same way. It's like it's too much work."

A week or so later, I meet her seventy-four-year-old husband, who has quite another story.

"My wife, she always has her own version of events and sticks with them, no matter what. She says the problem is my ED [erectile dysfunction], but the truth is she's never been much one for sex and so, sure, you get older and it's not so urgent anymore, and you're tired of the fight, so you just let it go most of the time. And you know the saying, use it or lose it. Well, it's true."

He's thoughtful for a few moments, then adds, "It would be a lot different if she could work up some enthusiasm. But she's so damn negative about it all, it's like a deep freeze. I don't have trouble with it other times, I mean, when I see some bimbo strutting down the street, or when some of her friends come on to me at a party. The plumbing still works, just not with her," he concludes angrily, leaving me to wonder at what point he'll decide to take up one of those invitations and test himself out.

It's well understood and documented by acres of research that the urgency and intensity of sexual desire wanes in the context of a long-term marriage. Philosophy professor Edmund Leites, writing about marriage among the Puritans in seventeenth-century England, notes that "the price of constancy, fidelity, and steadiness of feeling is the sacrifice of intense excitement, at least in the sexual arena and perhaps in others as well."⁵

The reasons, I think, are subtle, not easily teased out. Certainly there's something about familiarity that acts as a brake on sexual desire in marriage. The excitement of anticipation is gone; we know what to expect, what he'll do, what she'll do, what it will take to consummate the act where both are sexually satisfied. It's why all sex manuals emphasize changing the routine, al-

though they rarely understand how hard it is to do, how much habit and ritual and expectation frame our lives, how they die hard, whether in sex or in any other arena of living.

In his famous *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Freud writes about the importance of the unfamiliar, of obstacles to overcome, in heightening sexual desire.

It can easily be shown that the psychical value of erotic needs is reduced as soon as their satisfaction becomes easy. An obstacle is required in order to heighten libido; and where natural resistances to satisfaction have not been sufficient, men have at all times erected conventional ones so as to be able to enjoy love.⁶

Critics complain that Freud was writing about men and that he never understood women's sexuality. And I agree, but then, I'm not sure who fully understands what women's sexuality is really about. We have a whole feminist literature telling us that once released from its cultural chains women's sexual desire is at least as demanding and powerful as men's. As an abstract statement it may well be true, but sexual satisfaction doesn't live in the abstract. I don't mean to suggest that women don't have powerful spontaneous sexual urges, desires they can satisfy by themselves if they choose to, although most of the women in this study showed markedly little interest in masturbation.⁷ But what makes a sexual *relationship* work for a woman, what makes her eager to climb into bed with a partner, generally has much more to do with relatedness than the simple satisfaction of a sexual urge.

That said, it's also true that few people who have lived in a marriage for any length of time would argue with Freud's thoughts on the subject.

"The problem is that there's no closed 'paren,' nothing brackets the experience of marriage," explains a sixty-five-year-old man speaking of his dissatisfaction with sex in his marriage.

"Maybe the terrible thing about married life is that it's endless, which gives you a whole different sense of time and possibilities. In a relationship that's not 'till death do us part,' you have to make each evening count or else there won't be another one, but when you're married, it's just another day, another night. Where's the excitement in that?"

His wife, who is both less eloquent and less interested in the subject, says simply, "It's okay with me if we never do it again. I don't know what else to say except that after a while, it just gets boring. And I'm not the only one who thinks so; it's what I hear from my friends, too."

For single people, it's a different story. For them, no matter what the age or experience, no matter how liberated a person may be, sex in the single life represents not just challenge but the mystery of the unknown, the uncharted, the illicit. Each new sexual encounter holds some danger, some test of self, some fear of the vulnerability the sex act inevitably evokes. All these are powerful aphrodisiacs; all generate feelings that stimulate and excite.

"Before you're married, it's like an audition," remarks a sixty-year-old woman who had been single for five years before she remarried a year ago. "Each time you're together it's like you're on trial. Even with lots of sexual experience, you feel unsure about things, you know: Will this be the one? Will it work? Is it right? And the older you get, the harder it is to think about taking off your clothes in front of somebody you hardly know. I think all that makes people cling to each other sexually so that bells ring and sparks fly. But," she concludes with a heavy sigh, "When I got married this time, I was too old to believe the sparks could last, and the truth is, they didn't."

It's not just the unfamiliar, then, not just the need to overcome obstacles, but the anxiety they create that is an important stimulator of sexual desire. It's a link that's rarely explored because we generally think of anxiety as inhibiting rather than in-

citing sexual appetite. And in certain circumstances it does just that—but not always, not even most of the time.

Ask people about their sexual experience when divorce comes into the picture, for example, and more often than not, they report that they had the best sex in years when they knew they were on the verge of parting—an experience that often leaves them perplexed and wondering if they're making the right decision. But change the viewing prism, and we can see that the renewed sexual excitement is at least in part because the relationship that once seemed without boundaries has become bracketed. It has an end, a realization that immediately raises some uncertainty about when, how, even if, which in turn creates anxiety that calls for something, some action that will hold the feelings at bay.

Some people go on shopping sprees: men buy new cars, women fill their already overstuffed closets with new clothes. And some ward anxiety off by an internal psychological process that transforms it into sexual need, which lends the encounter a level of excitement and intensity that had been long gone from the marriage bed.

Sex—what it means, how men and women experience the loss of their younger, more vibrant sexual selves—this is the one place in the drama of aging where the gender differences remain profound.⁸ At the most obvious level, while the power dynamics inside marriage may have shifted in favor of wives as husbands become more dependent, in single life, they're more entrenched in male privilege than ever before. Again, it makes no difference how old a man is, what he looks like, what he does (or did) for a living, how much money he has, or even whether he has a hard time staying erect enough to have intercourse, there will almost always be a younger woman available if he wants one. But take even a casual look around the world of single women over sixty, and you'll see millions of very attractive women with no serious takers.

At a deeper, internal level, men and women experience the loss of sexual activity and desire quite differently as well. For women, who rarely if ever define themselves by their sexual prowess or conquests, sex for its own sake has little or no meaning; it's the loss of relatedness that's so hard.

"I miss sex," says a seventy-two-year-old friend, divorced and without a partner for ten years. When I remind her that she's turned down several opportunities in these years, she replies, "I'm not talking about sex for its own sake; I'm talking about a relationship, about being with someone I care about and who cares about me. Sex as a part of that, that's what I miss."

But for men whose sexual capacity and performance defines the very core of their manhood, sex is a major loss, no matter what their age.

"I haven't had an erection in years," says a ninety-year-old man, "but I still miss it and think about it. I look at an attractive woman and feel sorry I can't do anything about it."

"What is it you regret?" I ask.

He heaves a sigh and says, "What can I say? It's a big part of what being a man was all about."

When vaginal dryness, atrophy, or any of the other problems occur that lead to a woman giving up intercourse, she may feel the loss but it isn't an assault on her femininity. But for a man who gives up sex after too many failed attempts, it's a threat to the core of his masculinity. True, there may also be some relief in abandoning the struggle, but it's relief muddied by shame and humiliation, so humiliating that one man equated the loss with becoming like a woman.

"I might as well sit down to take a piss," says an eighty-year-old man, by way of explaining what it means to feel his sexual powers so diminished. "I don't mean any disrespect to you, but, you know, men stand up to piss; women sit down. That's the way it is. It's not even that I want to do it so much anymore; I

mean, I think about it, but . . ." He shrugs, slipping into silence for a moment or two, then, "I don't know; I don't know what to say, except you don't feel like a real man when you can't get it up anymore."

Like everything else about growing old, the loss of sexual activity and desire doesn't happen all at once; it just gets harder and harder to keep working at it, and after a while, it slips away. Sometimes it's just the years that take their toll, sometimes it's the stress in the relationship, and not infrequently it's illness, physical or mental.

"It was a struggle for a few years," recalls an eighty-year-old woman whose husband has since died. "I felt sad, but not because we were losing some great passion, because that was mostly gone anyway. But it had been a sweet and tender part of our relationship, and it wasn't there anymore. When we finally gave it up, it was a relief not to have to work so hard at something that wasn't so great anyhow, but there's also something missing."

Just as in other aspects of aging, some people, more often women than men, accept the loss of sex philosophically, while others go to any extreme to sustain the illusion of youthful vigor and sexual desirability. Most, however, fall somewhere in between, feeling both saddened and relieved, sometimes mourning the loss of sex as they watch it fade out of their lives, at other times accepting it.

"After my husband's heart surgery, it just wasn't the same," says a sixty-seven-year-old woman. "We thought about trying Viagra, but his doctor didn't think it was a good idea. He said a couple of people with heart problems had died after taking it and better to be safe than sorry."

"Is it a problem for you, giving up having intercourse?" I ask.

She sighs, "I don't know, maybe, sometimes it's okay, but then . . ." She gazes out the window, her brow wrinkling as she searches for words, then, speaking haltingly, "It's like there's also

something missing, not exactly the sex itself but ... I don't know, I can't think how to say it. It sort of doesn't come with words."

It sort of doesn't come with words. I left our meeting with the words ringing in my ears. I know what she means; it's part of my own experience, an experience that until now I haven't even tried to put words to, one whose importance to a relationship I didn't fully understand until it was gone. For most of the forty-five years my husband and I have lived together, sex was there, taken for granted, sometimes great, more often routine as the years went by, sometimes an intimate revelation, sometimes ... well, just sex. Then it's gone, and something is missing, something I didn't know about before, but it doesn't come with words, just feelings. It's not the sex; I miss that sometimes, but it's not the important thing.

I don't need advice books to tell me to make physical contact, to hold hands, kiss, hug, and cuddle. It's sweet and touching and ... And what? It doesn't take the place of real sex, and I don't mean just intercourse. I'm talking about doing sex, the fullness of the experience, the variety, the intimacy of a connection that's different from any other, a connection that merges your two bodies, that sets off a torrent of emotion that's unlike anything else, not just because it's sex but because it's relatedness in the deepest sense of the word.

I used to say jokingly, when trying to explain the joys of creativity, that writing a good sentence is as good as great sex. I think I meant it then, when I could still have great sex, but I know now that I was wrong. Nothing is better than great sex, because it's great only when it's an expression of love, intimacy, and relatedness that fills every corner of desire. And not even a good paragraph can do that.