

the
good girl
REVOLUTION

*Young Rebels with Self-Esteem
and High Standards*

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CHAPTER ONE

“Hi, Slut!”

There is a metal go-go cage in which a group of Duke girls clad in tiny denim skirts and halters perform a modified pole dance, but no one seems to be watching. . . . Much to the disappointment of many students, female and male, there’s no real dating scene at Duke—true for a lot of colleges. “I’ve never been asked out on a date in my entire life—not once,” says one stunning brunette. Nor has a guy ever bought her a drink. “I think that if anybody ever did that, I would ask him if he were on drugs,” she says. Rather, there’s the casual one-night stand, usually bolstered by heavy drinking and followed the next morning by—well, nothing, usually. “You’ll hook up with a guy, and you know that nothing will come out of it,” says Anna. The best thing you can hope for, she says, “is that you’ll get to hook up with him again.

—JANET REITMAN, *Rolling Stone*, June 1, 2006

When *Rolling Stone* magazine starts to read like the *National Review*, then clearly something has gone very wrong. Not since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 has there been such bipartisan agreement that we have a problem. It is certainly puzzling. On the one hand, girls are more educated and women more successful in business than ever before. At the same time, girls report that in their private lives, they are feeling enormous pressure to be sexually active and don’t know how to say no. Numerous studies from left, right, and center have shown that when women get to college, they are extremely dissatisfied with the lack of a “dating scene.” They long to be taken out but instead are made to feel they are weird if they don’t “go with the flow” of the hookup scene instead. “The guy means nothing to you” is the socially correct view to adopt. Even an article in a women’s magazine encouraging the sisterhood to be happy as singles—“Down with the Husband Hunt!” was the charming title—the author had to admit that

she “succumbs . . . from time to time” to the theory “that we are living in a lopsided dating universe in which the cards are all stacked in favor of the guys.” Kerry Ball, twenty-nine, of Miami, told her, “Men are just looking for girls to mess around with rather than have a relationship with or even simply date. There are so many single girls looking for relationships that these guys have no trouble finding someone to sleep with them.” The number of unmarried women between ages thirty and thirty-four has more than tripled during the past thirty years, and the percentage of childless women in their early forties has doubled. You might say that the “glass ceiling” has shifted from work to women’s personal lives.

At this writing, something called PSD is all over the news, and perhaps it may be helpful. I first read about PSD in *Wired*, and since *Wired* is a technology magazine, I assumed it was referring to Photoshop files (which have PSD file extensions) or that the writer had misspelled Canada’s PST, provincial sales tax. Neither assumption was right. But this new breakthrough is revolutionizing people’s intimate lives.

PSD stands for “pre-sex discussion.” As Regina Lynn glowingly reports, the sex therapist Roger Libby has recently discovered that if you get to know the person you’re about to have sex with, even a little bit, the sex itself is improved. “Sex is so much more than intercourse and [in his new book] he encourages readers to have an extensive pre-sex discussion, or PSD, before becoming sexually involved with a partner.”

Is sex more than just intercourse? This idea is not old-fashioned, like modesty or courtship, you understand. This is a modern thing. Libby is an adjunct professor at the Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality in San Francisco, and his advanced studies of humans have led him to conclude that young people, especially, should conduct PSDs. (His book is billed as *A Guide to Intelligent Sexual Choices for Teenagers and Twentysomethings*.) Then we come to the actual elucidation: “A PSD is an intimate and entertaining conversation that informs prospective lovers about each other’s feelings, desires, expectations, fantasies and her/his sexual knowledge and sophistication. It’s an introduction to the possibility of a sexual relationship or encounter.” Indeed, “a properly conducted PSD . . . includes the meaning of sex.”

Whenever I hear experts marketing older notions as newfangled radical concepts that have just occurred to them, like PSDs, it makes me wonder HDDTTPA?—How dumb do they think people are? It takes a college-

educated expert to be infected with the opposite notion in the first place; hence the surprise at the "revelation" of PSD, known to the rest of us as common sense.

But I can certainly appreciate the need for a verbal paint job. After all, look at what happened to me. Around ten years ago I began to notice that many young women were becoming disenchanted with casual sex, but it was equally clear that waiting for "the one" was seen as a bit pathological—only for those with hang-ups. Single at the time, and not yet living in our moment of heightened PSD awareness, I decided to pen a defense of sexual modesty. I knew that my arguments—that preserving the erotic depends on a sense of mystery, for example—might be challenged; but nothing prepared me for the tongue-lashings I would receive from my elders for questioning the ancien régime of the 1960s. The alarm was sounded, and all the professional smirkers were dispatched to the front lines. Katha Pollitt called me a "twit" who should be in charge of designing "new spandex chadors for female olympians." Camille Paglia simply declared, "Oh, she makes me sick!" In a sense, it was touching to see sworn ideological enemies join hands and come together—at long last—for the purpose of descending on me: feminists, antifeminists, libertarians, pornographers. At least I was a uniter, not a divider. *Playboy* featured my book under the heading "A Man's Worst Nightmare," and *The Nation* solemnly foretold that I would "certainly be embarrassed" and regret my stance "in a few years." I should be ashamed of myself. To some baby boomers, it seemed, modesty is much worse than adultery.

I trudged on, under the heavy burden of the Scarlet M, baffled but fascinated by the eruption I had instigated. After the *New York Observer* printed a front-page caricature of me as an SS officer, it dawned on me that my opponents were illustrating their intolerance far more colorfully than I could have done on my own. Although we live in a supposedly liberated age, our hysterical witch-hunting of those who question our ideal of recreational sex suggests something else: that our liberation does not extend quite as far as we imagine.

But I wasn't discouraged, not even when I received death threats, because I was too busy reading fascinating letters from young women. Precisely because being a romantic is nowadays an unpardonable sin, these young women, thousands of them, had been sure that something was very wrong with them. Seven years later, I still receive the same kind of letter,

and it never fails to touch me. Here are excerpts from various letters; you'll notice a common thread. First, from Rachel:

You basically laid out almost exactly how I felt as a woman. I am twenty years old and have been asking myself questions like, "What's wrong with me? Why haven't I had sex yet?" . . . Anyway, reading your book, my faith was restored. I am a romantic. . . . I couldn't figure out why I hadn't just slept with this guy or that one like my friends do. And I'll say I was so close to doing that just because I thought it would help me grow up. Be more my own age. Even my mother wanted me to do it. And that's why I thank God I read your book when I did. I began crying toward the end when I realized that nothing was wrong with me and that I was lucky to still have what I have. My desire to be with one person isn't childish or immature. . . . I'm not scared; I just don't have an interest in [sex] as a sport.

From Carrie:

Your book honestly helped me make sense of a lot of what I had experienced. I went through a bad stage in college where I remember thinking that my instincts (that what I was doing was bad) were irrational and struggled to adopt an "it's no big deal" attitude. Your book was the first time I really sorted through things enough to recognize that our instincts are there for a reason and that the "it's no big deal" attitude is such a horribly depressing view to accept.

About 70 percent of these e-mails and letters indicated that the writer felt that wanting marriage and children was an aspiration she needed to "hide." (From J: "Have I ruined something wonderful by giving in and hiding what I really wanted—marriage and children?") This did not surprise me, but I was shocked that according to nearly half of the letters, a girl's own parent thought something was wrong with her for not being sufficiently casual about sex. Here is one example, from an e-mail sent in October 2004:

Somehow with it being perfectly normal for twelve- to fourteen-year-olds to have field/bush parties, getting drunk and having sex and doing whatever the locally available substances were, I managed to be one of

the few that “escaped with my dignity intact,” I guess. I did end up getting ditched after eight months by a guy because I wouldn’t have sex with him. . . . I just didn’t like him that much. But I certainly did feel ashamed and embarrassed about remaining a virgin so long. . . . I am twenty-three now. My mother freaks out if I want to borrow the car to drive a friend back to [a nearby town] and return in the dark, but when I’d just turned twenty, and she and I went to Michigan to visit a guy I wasn’t technically seeing at the time, and to see the tall ships in Bay City, and I ended up in his hotel room, which was next door to ours. He was better at conversation and had something more interesting on TV, and Mom was staying up reading and watching QVC, so I wouldn’t be able to get much sleep there, either. After she found out that we hadn’t had sex, she asked me whether I was frigid or gay. He was nearly forty! Perfectly fine for your twenty-year-old daughter to screw a guy twice her age, just as long as she doesn’t return *your* car after dark when she’s going somewhere that’s all of forty-five minutes away. My mom thinks I’m a freak.

Usually these stories were depressing, but I did hear one that was priceless. A friend of a friend, in her late twenties, returned from a romantic weekend and was sharply interrogated by her mother—but not in the way you might expect. When she found out that her daughter hadn’t slept with the new boyfriend after a whole weekend away, the mother warned her ominously, “You’re gonna lose him!” (She didn’t; they eventually got married.)

Parents want to know how to speak to their children about sex, and kids certainly want to hear from parents. (“Teenagers Want More Advice from Parents on Sex, Study Says” is a typical news headline.) And the experts tell us that parents are the biggest influence on whether a teenager decides to have sex. Yet there is one big stumbling block: Often parents don’t realize that their sexual revolution has become the entrenched status quo. Today many young women feel oppressed by the expectation that they will engage in casual sex, just as their mothers once felt oppressed by the expectation that they would be virgins until marriage. Parents in the grip of a notion that they need to be “cool” want to show they understand that the kids are going to “do it anyway.” Ironically, this adds to the pressure. For boys too, *You’re liberated, so get going!* doesn’t always translate into an “I care” message. William Nobel, M.D., of the Pediatric Association of the University of Texas, shares a story about his practice:

Recently Todd, an anxious fifteen-year-old male patient, presented to clinic with vague reproductive tract complaints. He was accompanied by his mother, who returned to the waiting room after the initial interview. His history gradually revealed a series of sexual encounters with a woman several years his senior. The sexual liaisons included other risks as well, including alcohol and substance use. The teen's anxiety resulted from an awareness that his behavior placed him at risk for HIV. He requested HIV testing. While discussing the testing and evaluation for other sexually transmitted infections, the boy began to cry.

"I don't think that my mom loves me," he sobbed.

"Why do you say that?" I responded.

"She doesn't care where I go or who I'm with or if I come home at night. I don't have a curfew and she never asks what I'm doing."

Reluctance to set limits is not simply a U.S. phenomenon. Because of the challenges parents face after divorce—or many times simply because they believe freedom is the better approach—mum's the word. "Parents often don't want to be in their kids' bad books," says Sara Dimerman, a child and family therapist who is based in Toronto. After a twelve-year-old girl was stabbed on a street in Toronto's entertainment district at two-thirty AM one Saturday in May 2006, many people wondered why a twelve-year-old girl had been partying at all hours in the first place. The answer, apparently, was that eighth-grade graduation now resembles a high school prom, and many twelve-year-olds party all night like older teens. Coed sleepovers and all-night clubbing often have the parents' blessing: "Twelve is the new fifteen," said the local papers.

In a survey of 1,000 girls in Britain, seven times as many teens picked "lap dancer" as a "good profession" over being a teacher. And Jessica, a twenty-one-year-old camp counselor in Paris, tells me she cannot believe the way the twelve-year-olds speak to one another: *Les garçons disent aux filles, "Je veux te niquer," et les filles répondent, "moi aussi." C'est comme si ils se disaient, "Comment vas-tu?" et "ça va bien."* (The boys say to the girls, "I want to f—k you," and the girls say, "me too!" It's like saying, "How are you?" and "I'm fine.") *Si la fille ne répond pas "moi aussi," ils se moquent d'elle en disant "es-tu homosexuelle ou quoi?"* (If a girl doesn't say "me too!" then it's like, "Are you gay or what?")

Who is countering these pressures? Well, there's Sharon Stone, who

travels around the world and hears from young people while she is signing autographs. Often she is asked, "What to do if I'm being pressured for sex?" In March 2006, asked this by yet another girl, Stone saw fit to make public the advice she's been giving teen girls for a while: "I tell them what I believe—oral sex is a hundred times safer than vaginal or anal sex. If you're in a situation where you cannot get out of sex, offer a blow job." This advice was widely circulated. One Internet-based sex educator who works with teenagers thanked Stone for her "frank discussion"; he also "thought of teens I've talked to while doing sex education who have had sex when they really didn't want to." On the other hand, he "worried she may be unaware of the many STDs that can be transmitted via oral sex."

Sexually transmitted diseases are indeed a problem: over 4 million new cases are diagnosed each year. But the reason Stone's advice is awful goes far beyond STDs, I'm afraid. If a girl doesn't want to have sex, why can't she just say no, without having to offer an oral consolation prize? Nowadays, girls are made to feel that they have to offer *something*, and it had better be more than just the pleasure of their company.

The sad fact is that much of the sex teen girls have is unwanted. In a study of 279 female adolescents published in *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* in June 2006, about 41 percent of girls ages fourteen to seventeen reported having "unwanted sex." Most of the girls had "unwanted sex because they feared the partner would get angry if denied sex." And even when sex is wanted, it tends to be regretted soon after—especially by girls. According to a study done by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy in 2004, two-thirds of all sexually experienced teens said that they wished they had waited longer before having sex (in studies in both 2000 and 2004, the number of girls who regretted sex was consistently higher than the number of boys).

People are always surprised to learn this—as Diane Sawyer was when her famous special on Norplant in urban high schools turned up this unforeseen fact. All of the sexually active girls the reporters talked to wished they had waited until marriage. The adults in the segment were strongly in favor of Norplant for teenage girls, so hearing the girls confess this came as a shock.

The marriage educator Marline Pearson, who teaches at Madison Area Technical College in Wisconsin, described the pressure on girls "to have lots of casual sex." By the time girls are fourteen to sixteen, according to one of her young students, "they don't have any concept of sex as something special. After awhile it makes them feel worthless. There is no plea-

sure. They aren't enjoying it." Pearson sadly remarks, "I increasingly hear girls talk about sex as something you just do. Get it over with, get desensitized, so you don't think or expect too much of it. Sad commentary."

In a survey done in 2005, the steamy adult series *Desperate Housewives* ranked as the most popular network television show among kids ages nine to twelve. That means they are soaking up story lines such as "Bree" and her teen son competing to bed the same man, or glamorous "Gaby" trash-ing virginity:

"Are you sure she's a virgin?"

"Yeah, I wouldn't just bash her for nothing."

"Rich men don't marry virgins, for the same reasons they don't hire chauffeurs who can't drive. They value *experience*."

Yet in real life, the more experiences teens have, the more likely they are to be depressed and commit suicide—again, this is particularly true of girls.

In May 2006 a study supported by the National Institutes of Health found that among nearly 19,000 teens, girls were about four times more likely to be depressed if they experimented with sex, and that the depressive symptoms generally increased as the risky behavior increased. Girls who abstained from sex (or drugs) didn't have significantly different rates of depression from boys who abstained, but as soon as boys and girls started experimenting, girls were much more likely to become depressed "from engaging in low to moderate risk behaviors." These symptoms of depression included "a loss of appetite, feelings of sadness, . . . a loss of interest in areas in which they were previously interested, and a hopeless feeling for the future."

In an important study from the Pacific Institute for Research done in 2005, the authors concluded that "sex, drugs and alcohol among teens actually precede—and apparently lead to—the onset of adolescent depression, which contradicts the common belief that depressed teens may be 'self-medicating' through substance abuse and sex." For some time now, we've known that sexually active teenagers—particularly girls—are more likely to be depressed and to attempt suicide, but there is some kind of fortress or wall of denial between the facts and the advice that is given to teenagers. Yet their unhappiness can be ignored for only so long.

Every emergency room is seeing girls who have deliberately cut themselves badly, and psychiatrists who work in ERs tell us that self-mutilation

is usually caused by feelings of anger and rejection. The authors of *Packaging Girlhood* tell us not to worry too much: “Researchers tell us that cutting is not as severe a symptom as it may seem. It serves two purposes: It brings stress relief when a child feels overwhelmed, and it helps her feel real in a world that doesn’t know her, doesn’t see her.” Leaving aside the fact that the girls themselves report being miserable, and even if you accept the whitewashing—that they merely do not feel “real”—isn’t this strange enough? Suddenly girls do not feel “real,” in a society which is supposed to have girls’ liberation as its goal.

This, I would submit, is because conforming to badness is ultimately more oppressive than conforming to goodness. Badness demands that you lose your virginity ASAP, to whomever, as long as you get rid of it. You don’t have to like the person you’re hooking up with; as long as you go along, we won’t throw tomatoes at you. And if you *really* don’t want to have sex, then you must offer secondary sexual favors instead (as recommends Sharon Stone). Could it be that badness requires more suppression of individual preferences than goodness ever did? As the old guides for young people make abundantly clear, the point of delaying gratification was precisely to preserve your individuality, preferences, and goals—and your long-term happiness.

In contrast, a groundbreaking 2003 study of 372 college students appearing in the *Journal of Sex Research* found that both male and female students “hook up” primarily because of peer pressure, not because they themselves are really comfortable with uncommitted sex. This phenomenon is called “pluralistic ignorance,” a wonderful term coined by Floyd Allport in 1924. It’s what happens when individuals in a group each imagine that their private feelings or judgment diverge from the norm, but they nonetheless conform to that norm because they want to be seen as a desirable member of the group. Each believes that others behave a certain way because they truly want to, when in fact everyone else also has private qualms about the norm. As applied to uncommitted sex on college campuses, where “hooking up has become the norm for heterosexual sexual relationships,” researchers in 2003 found that it works like this:

Since the great majority of students do in fact hook up, it appears that most students believe that others are comfortable—more comfortable than they are themselves—with engaging in a variety of uncommitted sexual behaviors. . . . Consistent with other pluralistic ignorance re-

search, this study showed evidence of an illusion of universality. The students failed to appreciate the extent to which others have different comfort levels with hooking-up behaviors. That is, students wrongly assumed that the attitudes of others about hooking up were more homogeneous than they actually were.

Similar to other researchers, we found that men expressed greater comfort than did women with sexually intimate hooking-up behaviors. In the context of hooking up, this could lead to serious consequence. Our study suggests that men believe women are more comfortable engaging in these behaviors than in fact they are, and also that women believe other women are more comfortable engaging in these behaviors than they are themselves. As a consequence, some men may pressure women to engage in intimate sexual behaviors, and some women may engage in these behaviors or resist only weakly because they believe they are unique in feeling discomfort about engaging in them.

Everyone swims toward the norm and imagines that others are having a great time, when in fact many are drowning. Disturbingly, the authors conclude that “it is possible for a woman to experience sexual assault but not interpret the behavior as such, believing it to be normative behavior with which her peers are comfortable.” Of those college students who do regret hooking up, men tend to say a hookup was a “terrible experience” because of too much alcohol, or because the woman wanted a relationship (i.e., had the temerity to hang around afterward). For many women, on the other hand, a “terrible hookup” is one in which they are pressured to go farther than they wanted. People disagree about when unwanted sex becomes sexual assault, but one thing seems obvious: The hookup scene is not quite the endless party it is made out to be.

Why are college students having sex they don't really want to have, and why should teenage girls feel that they “cannot get out of sex”? The reason is that sex has become political. Looking “wild” and acting “wild” are supposed to be empowering, but more often they lead to misery, especially for young women who quickly learn to put their emotions in a deep freeze in order to do what is expected. Irene, fifteen, hooked up with a boy for some time—“we basically became friends with benefits,” she confided to a reporter for *The New York Times*. Unfortunately, the boy never got around to asking her out on a real date, as Irene was hoping, so she was “devastated.”

But she says, “Since then, I’ve become really good at keeping my emotions in check. I can hook up with a guy and not fall for him.” She doesn’t get this backward reasoning out of nowhere. Voicing a common view (and in the same *New York Times* piece), Jeanette May, cofounder of the Coalition for Positive Sexuality, declares that girls “are better served by having sex for their pleasure, without a lot of emotional attachment.” This explains why, instead of learning from her mistake and not giving herself so easily to the next guy, Irene turned on herself and her sense of right and wrong and saw her own capacity for feeling as the problem. After all, if she could purge herself of all feeling, there would be nothing standing between her and the casual sex she was supposed to enjoy.

Studies have shown that the fewer sexual partners adults have, the longer their marriages tend to last (and the happier, healthier, and more successful people are in general). Also, marital sex was found to be more physically and emotionally satisfying than sex among singles or those who cohabit. And yet, we still pretend that the more promiscuous and public sexuality is, the more exciting it is, even when the participants themselves do not experience it that way. Experience and social science lead to one conclusion; conventional wisdom and peer pressure recommend an entirely divergent path.

When you examine why young women are told to sleep around for the sake of feminism and “positive sexuality,” even when it makes them unhappy, the reason often comes down to a corruption of the idea of “girl power”: Girls must do everything boys do, even if it’s not working. Margaret Atwood, among others, believes that real equality “means equally bad as well as equally good.” Similarly, many people, noticing that men seem capable of sex without emotional consequences, conclude that jadedness and disconnection are now the goal for all humanity. As various media have reported, “slut” has become a casual greeting among girls (“Hi, slut!”), and many girls now compete at how “skanky” they can be. Our experts on teenage girls talk about how we needed to “reclaim” the word “slut” in order to fight against the “double standard.” If only we can glorify young women sleeping around the way that we embrace it for young men, then—supposedly—no one need feel bad. Apparently, now that girls greet one another with “Hi, slut!” we have achieved our goal. Yet when experts invoke a single standard, they always seem to mean a single low standard. So what’s the great achievement here?

The ideologues have long claimed that the only reason the promiscuous

girl is unhappy is the “stigma” imposed on her. If we didn’t ostracize her, if we accepted—nay, promoted—her, then she’d be flying high with notches on her belt just like Don Juan. I think it’s safe to say that we can test, and now discard, this theory. We live in an age when sex tapes are star-making vehicles, when strippers are teen girls’ role models, and when Slut lip balm and Dirty Girl body products are all “super stylin’.” And still, Doña Juanita is typically not the happy camper we have been led to expect. Witness Jessica Cutler, twenty-seven, a former aide on Capitol Hill who detailed her multiple Beltway conquests online, including flings with married men. *The Washington Post* praised her for being “free of romantic illusions” and an “American über-individualist,” yet her own perspective on herself was somewhat less stellar: “It probably is just a huge defense mechanism, dating several men,” she admitted. “Because you are, like, if it doesn’t go well with this guy, there’s always the others. . . . All your relationships are kind of half-assed.” A year later, Jessica told *New York* magazine that she was secretly hoping one of her “psycho” lovers would kill her, because “what a relief that would be.” A joke? Perhaps. But it takes a certain degree of self-loathing to joke about such things.

Being “equally bad” in an attempt to quash the double standard doesn’t seem to work very well. In 2005, Andrea Lavinthal and Jessica Rozler made a splash by proposing that the “walk of shame” be renamed something with “a more positive ring,” such as the “I Got Booty Boogie” or the “Post-Seduction Strut.” The authors say that “conflicting social messages” are why it’s no fun to step out on a Sunday morning in Saturday night gear and smudged mascara. I’m not convinced. More likely, if you don’t know the man well enough to have had a change of clothes at his apartment, the walk home is a stark reminder that you may have just exchanged bodily fluids with a virtual stranger. Instead of trying to reprogram women to feel good about this when clearly they do not, wouldn’t it make more sense to try to revive a single high standard?

Yet those who prop up the ideal of the bad girl always seem to take their cues (from the “strut” to the “booty”) from the most adolescent boys. In other words, it’s a rather immature and sexist sort of equality. You rarely hear someone say, “Gee! Scrapbooking is becoming so popular now among young women. Let’s get the boys to scrapbook too, and then we can all be equal!” It’s never the boys who must learn to scrapbook in order to lead us to utopia; rather, the girls must learn to sleep around and suppress their emotions.

Men report that the number one reason they are choosing to marry later, if at all, is that sex without commitment is so widely available. Yet curiously, the majority of advice books for women instruct them to be casual about sex—and specifically to deny even wanting to get married—in order to be “liberated” and attractive to a man. *The Hookup Handbook: A Single Girl’s Guide to Living It Up*, for example, doesn’t quite live up to its promise, fielding such depressing questions as, “We’ve hooked up three times; shouldn’t he ask me out?” and tackling “*the booty disparity (noun)*: The difference between what you think a hookup meant and what he thinks it meant.” As one might expect, there is no real cure for this booty disparity, according to the authors: “Dating is a thing of the past, gone the way of dinosaurs and stirrup pants. It’s extinct. Kaput. Over.” But if dating is kaput, and nonetheless there is a “booty disparity” to contend with, what is a young woman to do about those nagging hopes for something more? As twenty-six-year-old Frances asks me: “It’s like I’m supposed to pretend I’m not me—don’t want marriage—in order to be attractive, but then how do I know that my boyfriend really loves the real me, if he doesn’t know what I really want?”

A conundrum indeed, yet this is only one of many contemporary love problems. Increasing numbers of men are finding it impossible to perform with their girlfriends and wives because sex has become so “demystified.” Shockingly, when given a choice between a real woman and Internet porn, many men choose the porn. There is now talk of a nasal spray, PT-141, a “libido-enhancer” that takes effect in just fifteen minutes. Apparently, we need it.

In 2005, Professor Chyng Sun of New York University was shocked when she worked on a documentary about young people and pornography, so she wrote an essay in *Counterpunch* urging her fellow liberals to take pornographic images more seriously. As she found, it wasn’t just that in many porn flicks abuse and mistreatment of women are the whole point; it was also that viewing these images was damaging young people’s relationships.

In my interviews, it was painful to hear how both teenage boys and girls feel pressured to have lots of sex, often emotionally detached, at a younger and younger age; and how so many young women feel obligated to please men sexually because they believed that it was their role as a woman. A twenty-year-old female college student thought back to

her teen years and said that often she felt that her body was not hers but was for others to look at and gain pleasure from. It is also alarming that many young men and boys have watched a lot of pornography before they have opportunities for sexual intimacy. Some developed a fear of women when they found that real women's bodies were not as smooth and shaven and that real sex was nothing like the sex depicted in pornography. It is clear that pornography not only hurts women but also hurts men on many different levels.

Meanwhile, members of Single Mothers by Choice search online for the right sperm instead of the right man, who often takes too long to appear. One member, Lori Gottlieb, wonders: "Was believing in love today akin to believing in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and age-defying cosmetics?" Indeed, researchers from the University of Chicago and UCLA who have been tracking and quantifying loneliness for thirty years have found that it has reached epidemic proportions.

Then there are the difficulties caused by the general collapse of boundaries. A young mother of two—call her Andy—attends a black-tie holiday office party, where she is serenaded "at least four times" by an annoying rendition of the Pussycat Dolls' "Don't Cha." "Don't cha wish your girlfriend was hot like me?" the singer croons, as the women in the audience shift uncomfortably in their seats, hoping that this entertainer in the slinky cocktail dress will just go away. Instead she sings over and over, "Don't cha wish your girlfriend was raw like me?" Having spent hours prettifying themselves, and with husbands or boyfriends in tow, many had been hoping for something more along the lines of Peggy Lee's "When a Woman Loves a Man." Later in the same month, Andy will attend a show to benefit her daughter's school for developmentally delayed children. This time she and the other tired mothers are looking forward to a night out for a good cause, but instead they are confronted by anorexic-looking women modeling provocative clothing, and by a master of ceremonies joking about "hookers." There are children in the audience. Andy is the epitome of the modern woman—she even "swears like a sailor," as she jokes to me. But she is fed up. She wonders, "Isn't there such a thing as the right time and place anymore?"

To me it raises another question: If doing away with "repression" was supposed to be liberating, why are things now so bad? It is sad enough that

we cannot seem to protect children, but the attractive, intelligent women surfing for tadpoles and grown men trading intimacy for inflated megapixels do not exactly seem to be thriving, either. Amy Sohn, one of the more articulate sex columnists, became famous detailing her trysts for the *New York Press* in the late 1990s. Today she asks, "What is the point of casual sex if the sex part isn't any good?" An excellent question. It is now sex therapists who are encouraging women to "raise your standards" and "avoid the booty-call blues"—not for any moralistic reason but simply because casual sex doesn't deliver the goods: not sexual fulfillment, and not long-term commitments either.

Ian Kerner, the most popular sex therapist of the moment (he's even been a guest on Howard Stern's show), delivers the news gently, telling women, "Not to say you can't have casual sex, fall in love, and live happily ever after, but it's less likely." For those who wish to leave marriage aside, Dr. Kerner still issues a caution: "*It's your call*," he writes in his latest book. "You can have sex like a man but just know that the more casual the situation," the "less likely" you'll achieve satisfaction or indeed "any emotional state of happiness." So why is no one burning him in effigy? As an author who has written about how to satisfy your partner, Dr. Kerner is perceived as having authority in this arena. Lending him extra credibility, to be sure, is the fact that he is a man, and he can admit that casual sex is "hollow" for men too: "You can teach yourself to have sex like a man," he counsels, "but that doesn't mean that men, deep down, wouldn't rather learn to have sex like a woman." In other words, just as George Gilder noted back in 1973, it turns out that men are also better off being married and integrating their emotions.

Does the success of Dr. Kerner mean that the tide is turning? Yes and no. It's certainly refreshing that someone in his field can finally be honest about the emotional and physical dead end these casual flings have led to, instead of the mush we are usually bombarded with: "All choices are equal until you kill someone." (And even that may be OK if you had a bad childhood.) Still, we have known about the side effects of promiscuity for years, and many counselors and opinion leaders have proved themselves remarkably capable of ignoring the misery all around them.

Listen to the executive director of California's National Organization for Women (NOW), Helen Grieco, who recently rushed to the defense of the *Girls Gone Wild* videos: "I think it's about being a rebel, and I don't

think it's a bad notion," she told Elizabeth Strickland of the *San Francisco Weekly*. That's because "flashing your breasts on Daytona Beach says, 'I'm not a good girl. I think it's sexy to be a bad girl.'" Being good is seen as the worst possible thing a girl could be.

And so the bad-girl wave continues to crash through our lives. In its undertow, neither facts nor tears seem to matter at all.

From where does it draw its power? Perhaps the bad girl is simply the common erotic object of most men and women today; the men still seek her, and the women still try to be her. If this requires emotional disconnection, then so be it.

She has become our new norm.