

# MY DAUGHTER'S VAGINA



by Richard Jeffrey Newman



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*Boundaries, then, where nothing comes  
between us*  
Sam Hamill, "Many Happy Returns"



## ONE

The first time a woman opened her legs long enough that I could look for more than the few seconds it took to bend to her with lips and tongue or to climb up blind into her and start moving, I crouched between her thighs to get as close as I could, and I remember even now how the words began to list themselves in my head: pussy, beaver, twat, slit, love muscle, fur, muff, quim, cabbage snatch, box...and all of them but one felt inadequate, and that one was the one I wanted most not to think, the one I'd come to understand as degrading of my lover by its very existence, and yet no other word *but* cunt captured in my imagination the wet and hairy wildness, the pungent and disheveled and untamed and multi-shaded pink and red and brown and flesh-colored beauty of what I was looking at. I'd seen pictures of course, plenty of them, had discovered as a young teenager that I grew hard at the sight of them, but those images of carefully coiffed, sometimes completely shaven, meticulously arranged specimens of female genitalia, I understood now, were so obviously composed, so clearly intended as artifice, that I felt, looking at my lover, as if I were seeing a cunt for the first time.

I stared for so long that she became uncomfortable, "What are you looking at? Is something wrong down there? Answer me!"

"You're beautiful," I answered, and I know it sounds like something out of a romance novel, but the words came in a whisper, and I looked up at her and I smiled, and then I tried in everything I did next with my fingers and my lips and my tongue to make sure she knew that I'd meant what I said, and when she asked me to fuck her, her word, not mine, tears—but how do I write this without sounding like a braggart? How do I make you see that this is really how I remember it and that this memory, even more than it makes me feel good about myself, which of course it does, humbles me and fills me with awe and gratitude—tears had risen into her eyes. It was, she explained as we lay together afterward, the first time a man had told her she was beautiful "down there," much less made love to her in a way that convinced her he really meant it.

"And all those other times?" I wondered to myself, "What had I meant then? What had she understood my meaning to be?"

## TWO

The fundamentally alien universe that a woman's experience of sex is to me. That mine is to her. So fully do we romanticize heterosexual lovemaking as a communion of souls, a synthesizing of opposites, the fulfillment and expression of our deepest emotional needs, that it's easy to forget just how inaccessible the interior landscapes of male and female sexual embodiment are to each other. Or, perhaps more to the point, how strongly this romanticization invites our forgetfulness, encourages, even mandates that we refuse to see just how deeply, when it comes to sex, physical differences divide us.

This semester, I'm teaching an independent study project in creative nonfiction with two women, each of whom wants to write about gender and sexuality, exploring specifically the meaning and consequence of childhood sexual abuse in her life. One of the books I've asked them to read is Andrea Dworkin's *Intercourse*, a text which is usually, and I think inaccurately, read as an argument against heterosexual intercourse on the grounds that the nature of the act—man penetrating, woman penetrated—demeans and exploits women by definition. Given the way Dworkin writes, it's not a difficult misreading to come to, and so when they asked me whether *Intercourse* should indeed be read that way, I suggested we discuss the following excerpt from the section called "Occupation/Collaboration": "The political meaning of intercourse for women is the fundamental question of feminism and freedom: can an occupied people—physically occupied inside, internally invaded—be free...?"

Easy to misinterpret and dismiss—after all, how can a woman who willingly has intercourse be understood as having been *invaded*, with all the connotations that word carries of warfare and colonization?—Dworkin's question is less about women's personal experience and individual choice than it is about the nature of female identity. For while a clear distinction can generally be assumed, for example, between a woman's experience of rape and her experience of the kind of intercourse that people mean when they use the word lovemaking, focusing on that distinction tends to obscure the fact that sexual intercourse is generally understood in our culture as the defining moment of femaleness and womanhood. More to the point, and this is what I understand the crux of Dworkin's question to be, if a woman cannot be understood to exist fully as a woman—whatever you understand "to exist fully as a woman" to mean—

until her body has been "physically occupied inside, internally invaded" by a man, then it doesn't really matter how tender and/or loving and/or intensely pleasurable intercourse is for her, the freedom of her body had already, by definition, been compromised, not merely before she had sex, but even before she was born. And if it is intercourse that makes a woman a woman, or, perhaps more precisely, if what makes a woman a woman in patriarchal culture is her capacity for being genitally penetrated—which means intercourse is both an expression and confirmation of her gender—then the question arises whether the difference between the kind of intercourse most people would describe as lovemaking and the kind we call rape can accurately be characterized as one of kind. Maybe, Dworkin is asking, this difference is more properly seen as one of degree, since in each case a woman is fulfilling the mandate of her socially prescribed gender identity.

I'd come to class prepared with references to passages in my students' own essays that helped to demonstrate the validity of Dworkin's question, but something in the women's eyes told me they'd already gotten it and that to say more than what I have paraphrased above would have been both superfluous and self-serving. For no matter how important I thought Dworkin's question was, it would never mean the same thing to me as it did to them, and so I fell silent, letting the room fill the gap of otherness that had opened up between us; and it was in this silence, watching the faces of these two women who had placed their trust in me both as a teacher and, given what they wanted to write about, as a man, that my imagination made the leap that was the true starting point of this essay: Had I lived a different life—that of my parents, for example, who married when they were in their early twenties—one of these two women was young enough that she could've been my daughter. I don't mean that I felt fatherly towards her, or that she saw me as a father figure, but this abrupt awareness of the age difference between us brought me back to the conversations my wife and I had been having about whether or not to conceive a second child. I thought about how, if that hypothetical offspring had turned out to be a girl, she would have no choice but to grow up in a world where the validity of Dworkin's question was etched irrevocably into her body. I thought about how I would from the first moments of her life face this daughter across the same terrain of difference that was separating me from my students, I thought about how, precisely because she will be my daughter, silence will not be an option.

"And so what," I almost asked myself out loud, "what will I say to her?"

## THREE

Sheikh Nezawi devoted an entire chapter of *The Perfumed Garden*, which he wrote in the sixteenth century and which Richard Burton translated into English in 1886, to "The Divers Names of the Virile Member." Some are self-explanatory, like Generative Organ, Hairy One, or Bald-Head. At least one, The Pigeon, is interesting as a metaphor because of the way it maternalizes the penis: "It is so called because, after having been swollen and at the moment when it is returning to its state of repose, [this kind of penis] resembles a pigeon settling on its eggs."<sup>1</sup> In most cases, however, Sheikh Nefzawi treats the penis synecdochically, making it clear that in describing certain kinds of penises, he is also describing the men to whom they are attached. Thus we have "The Creeper":

This name has been given to the penis because, when it gets between a woman's thighs and sees a plump vulva, it starts to creep on her legs and pubis, then, approaching the entrance, it continues to creep until it has taken possession. When comfortably installed it penetrates completely and ejaculates.<sup>2</sup>

Or "The Knocker":

It is thus named because, when it arrives at the door of the vulva, it gives a light knock; if the vulva replies and opens the door, it enters; but if it gets no reply, it knocks again until successful. By knocking at the door we refer to the rubbing of the penis on the vulva until it becomes moist. The production of this moisture is what is called opening the door.<sup>3</sup>

That our feelings about sex, about how we make love and about the people we make love with are reflected in and, in part, created by the way we talk about our genitals is a truism that hardly bears repeating. Since my son was born, however, I've been thinking

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<sup>1</sup> Sheikh Nefzawi, *The Perfumed Garden*, trans. Richard Burton (Rochester: Park Street Press, 1992) 54.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 59

about this truism a great deal, for his presence in our lives confronts my wife and myself on a daily basis with the question of how and why we teach him to talk and feel about his body the way we do. When he was two, for example, he began to have erections when my wife washed his penis in the bath. "I don't like it like this," he would say, starting to cry, "I want it to be soft," and he would try to push his organ back into its foreskin, which only guaranteed of course that the erection would continue.

Usually, either because I was not yet home from work or because I was typing away in my office with the door closed, I didn't hear him crying, and so I learned about these bathtub erections only after the fact. One night, however, when I walked into the bathroom because I needed to tell my wife something, she was crouched at the edge of the tub talking to my son, who was sitting with the water running behind him and breathing the last gasping breaths of what had obviously been a two-year-old's very heavy cry. When she explained that he'd had an erection and was very upset about it, I crouched down next to my wife and leaned over the edge of the tub to get closer to him. "Shahob," I said, "sometimes my *dool* also gets hard when I don't want it to. I just wait and it gets soft again. You do the same thing. Don't get upset. Just wait and it will go back to the way you want it."

Shahob's eyes widened with a feeling so big it left him speechless. I touched his face, kissed his cheek and walked out. My wife told me later, though, that after I left, Shahob turned to her and said, in Persian, which is her native language and for him the language of intimacy, "Maman, dool eh baba sefteh!" (Mom, Dad's penis gets hard!) We puzzled briefly over what my son had meant, though we couldn't and would never be able to know for sure, and I tried to remember if, when I was a young boy, any of my adult male relatives had talked to me about my body in a similar way, offering themselves as a reflection of my biological maleness and the stance I might take towards it. I don't think anyone ever did, but I did recall a moment when I was no older than five or six in which I caught a glimpse of what I might have learned if someone had: My father and I were in the locker room getting ready to leave the beach. His back was to me and he was talking about something I couldn't listen to because he was naked. My eyes wandered among the whorls of black fur that ran from the nape of his neck, along his shoulders and arms, down his back and into the dark cleft of his buttocks. When he turned around, I could see where the hair of his back met the hair of his front in the bush between his legs. His penis hung like a pendulum, swinging slowly between his thighs when he walked, and I wondered if it got hard like mine did, if he played with it like I'd begun to do. I wanted to run and throw my arms around him, to pass through his skin and know what it would mean to live with such size. I was hungry with the prescience that his body would someday be mine, that my body was his in the making.

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*Dool* is the Persian child-language word for penis. We use it with my son because it's the word my wife uses with him. As opposed to *jish*, the word she says she would use for vagina if we had a daughter—and which is also the Persian child-language word for urine—*dool* as far as I know refers to nothing other than penis and functions neither as

a metaphor nor any other figure of speech. In this straightforward signification, *dool* seems to be similar to the word that comes back to me from my own childhood: *dingus*. Of the two, I prefer *dool*. *Dingus*, when I say it now, sounds too much like something you'd call someone when you wanted to put them down, instead of saying *idiot* or *fool*.

If English were my wife's native language, and the choice were entirely mine, I think I'd teach my son to call his genitals his penis, plain and simple. He's got plenty of time to learn the other names that organ goes by and to negotiate the layers of meaning with which those names shape the way his body and his sexuality will be seen, both by himself and the society in which he lives. According to the *Thesaurus of Slang*, published in 1988 by Facts on File, there are one-hundred-forty-three of these alternative names. There seems to be neither rhyme nor reason to the order in which the list is given, but a quick read-through reveals some obvious categories of reference.

- FOOD: meat, banana, cucumber, kosher pickle, baloney, sausage, salami, frankfurter, tootsie roll, peppermint stick, jelly roll.
- TOOLS & MACHINERY: dipstick, divining rod, pike, piston, machine, roto rooter, instrument, fountain pen, hammer, poker, tool, plunger, cherry picker.
- WEAPONS: bazooka, gun, spear, sword, rammer, battering ram, dagger, pistol, peace maker.
- ANIMALS: serpent, snake, one-eyed monster, one-eyed wonder, pecker, pup.
- EMOTION: love muscle, rod of love, heart, joystick, Mr. Happy.

Many of these words—in addition, of course, to the old standbys: *cock*, *dick*, *prick*, *schlong*—I remember from when I was younger, and I remember how much I didn't like them, not because they were obscene per se, but because they seemed to me so unimaginative. As a teenager, I was an avid reader of *Penthouse's* "Forum," letters to the magazine that purported to be first person accounts of the sexual adventures enjoyed by the publication's male and female readers. The stories fascinated and excited me, and they became—as they were intended to become—the basis for many of my sexual fantasies at the time, but I often couldn't help laughing out loud at the linguistic contortions the letter-writers would go through to avoid using the word penis. Not only did the constant repetition of expressions like "love-muscle," "rod of love," "tootsie-roll," and "poker" become ridiculous—accompanied as they always were by a number of inches, as in "he (or I) reached into me (or her) with his (or my) nine-inch cherry picker"—but the descriptions the letter writers came up with often de-eroticized the act they were describing. What could be less appetizing, I thought, from either a male or a female perspective, than describing a woman giving oral sex to a man as "swallowing his salami whole?"

One surrogate term for penis did capture my imagination, though I learned it from my friends, not the magazine. Like the description of "The Pigeon" from *The Perfumed Garden*, "skin flute" seemed to me a metaphor that broke free, at least potentially, of the demeaningly simplistic and single-minded point of view—I would not at the time have known to say male dominant or patriarchal—that gave rise to those other expressions. The only time I ever heard "skin flute" used, however, was in reference to

masturbation—"He's playing the skin flute!"—which my friends never said in anything other than a derisive tone of voice I found hard to comprehend. To me the idea of masturbation as a kind of music-making, of the giving of sexual pleasure as a kind of musical composition, was fascinating. I'd just begun in my high school music theory class to learn about tension, release and resolution, and I remember how in a lecture about a specific composer—I think it was Wagner—my teacher had us listen to a symphonic work in which the music seemed like it was going to resolve at any moment, but instead, usually accompanied by a change in harmonies, moved a half-step up, raising the level of tension, changing key and sending the melody off in a new direction to search for the resolution it required. I don't how I decided this, but I knew from then on that I wanted sexual pleasure to be like that, and I practiced as both the instrumentalist and the instrument, discovering not only the hows and wheres of touching myself, but also techniques of breath and of holding and releasing the pleasure until it sometimes seemed I could sustain it indefinitely.

To some it will sound like I am talking about Tantric sex, but I'm not. I didn't know at the time that such a thing as Tantric sex even existed. I thought everyone saw sexual pleasure the same way I did.

I didn't understand how wrong I was till I got to college. Once, during my sophomore year, I was hanging out with a group of friends in the room of the guy who was "the stud" or our dorm. The talk had turned to the part we were going to that night and whether any of would be lucky enough to get laid. The stud laughed, "For me, it's not even a question. I have to get laid; if I don't, I don't feel like a man."

"Why?" I asked the stud. This was a new idea for me. I was not a virgin, but I had never, at least not consciously, equated that I'd had with what it meant for be to be, or to become, a man.

"If I don't fuck a woman at least two or three times a week," the stud answered, "it's like there's this emptiness that starts growing inside me—but wait..." he interrupted himself and looked around at the group. "Why are you asking this? Don't all guys feel the same way?" Now he turned to me, his voice taking on a slightly accusatory tone, "What do you do when you're horny and you can't get laid?"

"I masturbate," I said. "Sometimes I like it better than being with a woman." Which was true. When I was by myself I was in complete control and I could orchestrate my pleasure the way I wanted, something the women I had been with so far seemed not to care very much about.

When I said the word masturbate, a tension entered the room that had not been there before, and my friends were silent for what seemed like minutes, though it was probably fifteen seconds at the most. It was as if they didn't know what the word masturbate meant and were afraid to ask, though I knew of course that couldn't be the case. Then, as if on cue, they all started speaking at once, but the focus of their attention had nothing to do with my original question. Instead, they wanted to know why I didn't have

a girlfriend and if I wanted them to help me find one. A few offered to introduce me to girls who "put out." With a girl, they explained to me, and it was clear from their tone that they assumed I was a virgin, "it"—meaning ejaculation—was entirely different from when you were by yourself. The simple fact of the girl's body next to yours guaranteed, and this was the word they used, guaranteed that the sensation would be phenomenal. Even if she didn't know what to do, they said, it didn't matter. The bottom line was skin on skin.

I disagreed. For while oral sex often left me quite literally weak in the knees—and my friends were surprised to learn I was not as inexperienced as they'd assumed I was—my experience of intercourse with the same woman was, as often as not, disappointing by comparison.

My friends insisted that the problem had to be with me. When they had sex, they said, from one encounter to the next, the sensation was always, uniformly, great. Personally, I found it hard to believe that anyone could think this way, but the more sexually active I became, and the more I found myself with women whose entire idea of male sexual pleasure could be summed up by the in and out and up and down of an engine piston, the more I began to realize that my friends' ideas of pleasure were invested not in the "bottom line" of skin on skin, as they had claimed, but in the joy of conquest, of knowing that a woman had made herself into that piston's casing.

*The political meaning of intercourse for women is the fundamental question of feminism and freedom: can an occupied people—physically occupied inside, internally invaded—be free?* I think of my student who writes so eloquently about how sexual penetration is painful for her, a legacy of the sexual abuse she survived as a child, and about how, despite the pain she feels, she fakes orgasm both to protect the ego of the man she's with and to keep the secret of her abuse a secret; and I think of my other student who wonders in the conclusion of a poignant essay about her own abuse if there is a mark on her, visible only to men, inviting them onto and into her body, and I remember the list she makes in that essay of all the men who have put their hands and mouths and more on and in her as if they were responding to such a mark; and I think of the daughter I do not yet and may never have, and of my wife, and of the women who were my lovers before my wife, and I am humbled that they were and are and will be willing to trust me, and I am astonished, because I don't always know if I can trust myself.

## FOUR

Sitting on my bed with her back against the wall, Beth—who's come to visit during my first year of graduate school—tells me that she's at last made her decision: She's going to study fine art. I should be happy for her, but I'm suddenly listening from a place so deep inside myself that the sounds leaving her mouth no longer coalesce into meaningful units. There is a moment of blankness, and then, as if someone else has taken control of my brain, I am forced to watch a vision of myself getting up from the chair where I've been sitting, putting one hand around Beth's throat, holding her against the wall, and with my other hand slapping her face back and forth until she is senseless and bloody. I see myself screaming in her ear, letting her drop to the floor, and kicking her in the stomach as hard as I can. In the vision, my mouth moves but no words come out.

Unaware that I've stopped hearing what she has to say, Beth continues talking, gesturing to emphasize the importance of her words, imploring me with her eyes for I-don't-know-what, and then the violence in my mind begins again. Realizing that my hands have clenched into fists, I excuse myself and move quickly to the bathroom. Locking the door behind me, I take deep breaths and splash cold water on my face. When I'm sure the impulse to lash out has passed, I flush the toilet and go back to the bedroom where, thankfully, Beth notices it's time for me to go to class. I grab my books, kiss her quickly on the cheek, and, knowing that I will need some time alone to sort out what has just happened, tell her I have work to do in the library and therefore won't be back until just before we're supposed to go out for dinner.

The afternoon sun is warm on my face, and so I decide to walk to class instead of taking the bus. Beth's decision to become an artist *should* make me very happy. Not only does it mean she's choosing to do what she really wants to do, but it also holds out the promise of resolution to a troubling tension within our relationship. More than once she's told me she's afraid I will become more committed to my writing than to her. Now that she has her own art to commit to, I'm hoping she'll begin to see that the two devotions need not be mutually exclusive.

I'm starting to feel a little better, more in control of myself, but then, from out of nowhere, I see again the images of myself doing violence to her, and I know I'll never be able to sit through class. So, instead, I go to the library. My idea, as I settle into one of the chairs on the second floor, is to write out what I'm feeling in a letter to myself, a strategy I've used before when I don't know what's going on inside me. As soon as I put my pen to the page, though, what comes out does not begin *Dear Richard*. Instead, it is the beginning of a poem:

I want a bearded man, shirtless, in faded jeans,  
to come one barefoot night and take me in his mouth.

I don't know where the words come from, but the shock of recognition when I read them is immediate and frightening, and I wonder if I'm trying to tell myself that I'm gay and that the problem I have with Beth is that she should have been Ben. I remember Brian and how we became friends in our senior year of high school, watching a teammate strike out trying too hard to hit the ball over the fence during a gym-class softball game.

"I don't get it," Brian said to no one in particular, shaking his head from side to side as the other boy slammed the bat to the ground, threatened to beat the shit out of the pitcher, and stormed off the field as if he'd failed to make a team he'd dedicated his life to making. "I just don't get it."

"Get what?" I asked.

We'd been standing next to each other through most of the class, but Brian looked at me as if he were seeing me for the first time, "What's the big deal? I mean, it's not like he's going to fail for striking out."

"You're right," I said. "It doesn't make sense."

Brian's face lit up as if he were visiting from another country and had at last found someone who could speak his language. Then his eyes narrowed a little. "Yeah, but at least you can hit the ball," he said, testing me. He was not much of an athlete.

"So I can hit the ball," I returned. "So what?"

And we were friends; and we quickly became best friends. Sadly, though, what I remember most clearly about our friendship is the day it began to end. "You're just different," he told me sitting in my room. "I've never met anyone like you, and they can't accept that."

"I've never met anyone like you before either," I responded, not even bothering to ask him who *they* were.

"But they're saying we're closer than we should be, that we're not, you know, normal."

"So? When have we ever cared what 'they' have to say?"

Brian looked so grateful for these words that I thought he was going to cry, and his eyes did start to grow big with a feeling that welled up in him, but then he looked away and almost whispered, "Maybe they're right. Maybe we are closer than we should be."

I tried to convince him that he was wrong, but it didn't work. He started bringing female friends along whenever we went out, and—in my memory anyway—college applications, yearbook committees, and other graduation-related work suddenly kept him so busy he had less and less time to see me. The summer after graduation, while I was working at a sleep-away camp in Massachusetts, we wrote letters, but when I came home, he was gone, off to his freshman year at Cornell University. I probably had his phone number and address, but I don't think I ever used them, and I don't remember receiving either mail or phone calls from him. We did try once to reconnect during the winter break of our freshman year, meeting for a drink at one of the bars we'd hung out at when we were still close. He brought his girlfriend, a dark woman who sat silently in her corner of the booth while Brian and I struggled to find things to say to each other. The conversation is lost to me now, but I can still feel the finality of our good-byes, neither of us even pretending that we'd try to see each other again.

At the end of that academic year, while I waited on line to register for my sophomore classes, I met the woman who'd sat next to me in twelfth-grade English. "Whatever happened to your friend Brian?" she asked while we made small talk to pass the time.

"He's at Columbia," I answered, "but I haven't heard from him in a long while."

"You know," she said, "everyone thought the two of you were gay."

"I know."

"Were you?"

"No."

With cinematic timing my turn to register came next, and I gave her a small, silent wave as I walked to the registrar's window. Back in my room, however, I wondered about my answer. It was the answer I think Brian would have wanted me to give, and I gave it without a second thought. Despite its literal truth, however, or, rather, its truth given that what the woman probably wanted to know was whether Brian and I had ever had sex, the word "no" felt dishonest, as if I were denying the emotional content of our friendship, not characterizing its physical nature.

When I think about Brian now, I often wish to have back that moment when he decided "they" were right and we were wrong, not because I think I could have done anything differently to change his mind, but because envisioning how things might have been different is a gesture of defiance I feel I should have made a long time ago, a way to

begin figuring out the answer I ought to have given to the woman from my English class, and of understanding why I responded with a homoerotic poem to the violence I imagined doing to Beth. We ended up not going to dinner that night, for after I wrote those two lines—and those two lines were all I wrote the whole time I was in the library—I felt better, calmer, more at peace with myself, and so I was able to tell her about the vision my imagination had conjured for me. We spent the night trying to understand where in our relationship my anger came from, but our only success—at least from my point of view, since it left me bent over, laughing with hysterical relief—was that I found the courage to scream out what I was really feeling, and they are words I regret even now, "I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!"

Beth, of course, was horrified and deeply, deeply hurt, but instead of breaking up with me, or at least putting some distance between us while I tried to figure out where my rage was coming from, she stayed with me for the rest of the weekend, a decision that can only be described as courageous and loving, and we found a way to feel like we could stay together despite what I had imagined and what I'd said. I was immensely grateful to her for that, though I don't think I ever expressed that gratitude sufficiently enough.

What disturbed me most at the time—aside, of course, from the content of what I imagined—and what continues to haunt me whenever I think about it, is that I didn't even know I was so enraged. There were tensions in my relationship with Beth, as there are in any relationship, but nothing of a magnitude, or at least nothing I experienced as of a magnitude, that corresponded to the violence I imagined myself doing. Even now, more than twenty years later—and in all that time I've had nothing even remotely resembling the experience I've just described—I find myself wondering, sometimes fearfully, at what I don't know about the subterranean workings of my psyche. I am an angry man, and I know that much of my anger is sexual, and if there is anything that being a man is supposed to give you license to do—and I am talking here about deeply held cultural values, not the laws of any given country, or the ethical or moral principles contained in religious or spiritual or other didactic texts—it is to take your sexual anger out on the bodies of others, usually women, and to do so with relative impunity. I have, as you will see, good reason to be angry. What I want is to stop being afraid of my anger, and of myself.

## FIVE

At eleven, I'm the youngest of eight boys lined up along one row of lockers in the otherwise empty men's room at the swimming pool to which the day camp I am attending takes us every other day. Normally, I'd be changing with boys my own age, but a mix-up back at the camp grounds landed me on the bus with these guys, who are all twelve and thirteen. I turn my back to them to hide the erection that has taken hold of my body and which I am having difficulty fitting into my bathing suit. Despite my best efforts to remain inconspicuous, however, my movements attract the other boys' attention and one of them sneaks up behind me and looks over my shoulder. "Hey," his voice rings out metallically, "look at the size of Newman's boner!"

Quickly, like a pack of dogs that has been thrown a single piece of meat and waits to see which one will be brave enough to try to take it first, the group surrounds me in a tight circle. I stand there unable to move, my body pointing me into the air above the middle of the room, wishing I could vanish, that *it* would vanish, but no matter how much I will it, the damned thing will not go down. Then, as if we are in a Greek play, the chorus begins to speak:

"What are you, a homo!?"

"Other guys' dicks must turn him on!"

"Wanna suck mine, *queer!*?"

The taunts continue for what seems like hours, though it is probably only a few minutes, and then the head counselor comes in and ushers us all out to the pool. I can't believe he didn't hear what the other boys were saying, but he acts as if he didn't, barely looking at me as he shows me where the boys in my group have spread their towels.

Later that evening, while I'm getting ready for bed, I stand naked before the full-length mirror inside my door and tuck my penis out of sight between my legs. I'm not trying to imagine myself as a girl, but I am intrigued by the possibility of a body that does not have erections.

The first time the old man who lived at the top of the staircase said hello to me, he stopped for a moment as we passed in the courtyard and looked at me as if he'd known me my whole life. I stood there, taking in the warmth of his gaze, wishing as he walked away that I'd said something to make him stay so I could tell him who I was. I was thirteen years old.

Over the next couple of months, a ritual of greeting grew between us. He would smile and say hello first; I would smile, say the same thing back, and then a long, silent moment would pass while he looked at me and I stood there, too happily embarrassed to move.

Then, one late summer's day, after our usual exchange was over, the old man did not keep walking. "When am I going to see you?" he asked.

"Soon!" I answered, not knowing exactly when soon would be, but absolutely certain that it would come.

Not too long after this, as I was going out to play with my friends, the old man met me at the bottom of the staircase leading to the front door of our building. As I reached to turn the knob, he held the door shut with his right forearm. With his left, he maneuvered me face first into the corner near the mailboxes where the door frame met the wall. Covering my body with his own, he ran his hands beneath my shirt and up the legs of my shorts, groped my chest and belly, squeezed my butt, grabbed between my legs, and all the time, over and over again, he was asking me that same question, "When am I going to see you?"

I had no words for what he was doing to me, no training such as young children get now in how to scream no to scare off an attacker. All I could do was stand there till he was finished. Then I ran. I don't remember how far or how long, but I ran as if I could leave my skin behind, as if running would turn me into another person. When I finally stopped running, in the small park across the street from the Lutheran Church where my friends and I sometimes hung out at night, I sat a long time with the knowledge that my running had undone nothing, that my body was still the body he'd touched, and I knew that he would want to touch me again.

I told no one what had happened, and when the old man passed me the next day and said hello, I said hello back the way I always did, pretending not to notice the ironic and conspiratorial twist he added to his smile. A few weeks later, he saw me sitting with my friends in front of our building and asked me to help him upstairs with some packages he was carrying. I wanted to say no, but couldn't, afraid that my refusal would somehow lead my friends to the truth of what he'd done to me. So I took the package he handed me and followed him upstairs.

As soon as the door of his apartment shut behind him, he put his packages down and took the one I was holding and dropped it to the floor. The cans at the bottom of the bag landed with a crash that shook the whole apartment.

Snaking his arms around my waist, he undid my belt, unzipped my pants, and all I could do was stand there, frozen to the spot where my feet had stopped moving.

Once my pants were around my ankles, he took me gently by the hand and led me to the couch that also served as his bed. I saw he'd taken out his two front teeth. His eyes, at what I imagine was the fear in mine, grew tender, almost fatherly, "You've never had a blow job before, have you?" When I shook my head no, his voice filled with concern, "But don't you want me to love you?"

In the silence with which I responded, he took my penis in his hands—I remember thinking that his fingers were like a cage—and he told me how good my sex was, how beautiful and big, and then his own pants were down, and his organ, large and purple, hung in front of my face, and his voice came from somewhere above me, urging me to play with "it," at least to touch "it," and I don't remember if I did, but I do remember his hand on the back of my neck, and then I see myself walking wordlessly to the door of his apartment, unlocking it, closing it behind me, and then I am in my bed, curled in the fetal position, where I stay until it is time for dinner.

The next day, he saw me standing by myself in front of our building and pleaded with me to go upstairs with him again. This time, he promised, would be different. He would move more slowly, be more gentle, but something in me rebelled. I said no, ignoring his further pleas until he walked away.

The old man never spoke to me again, and I remember only once trying to tell someone what he'd done to me. I was sitting outside with my friend Kim when he passed by. He nodded hello to her and she nodded in return. When I knew he was out of earshot, I turned to her, tried to fill my voice with everything she'd need to understand what I really meant, and said, "He's a faggot!"

Kim looked at me in honest confusion, "So?"

The blank stare I answered her with was as uncomprehending as the silence in which she waited for me to explain myself. Everyone knew—or at least I thought everyone knew—that to be a homosexual man was to prey on young boys. Now, of course, I know differently, but to have said anything else at the time would have forced me to confront something I hadn't even begun to name: that I'd gone to the old man's apartment knowing full well what was going to happen when I got there.

## SIX

"Are you a virgin?" I'd been trying to ask Karen this question almost from the moment our relationship had become physical.

She looked surprised, but not offended. "Are you?" she asked back.

"Yes."

"So am I," she said, "and I want to stay that way."

"Me too!" I laughed out loud with relief.

Karen tilted her head back and looked at me with a gleam in her eye. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes," I said, and she undid the circle my arms made around her, took me by the hand, and led me through the quiet of a midnight snow to the far end of the yard behind the buildings where we lived. We climbed into the large, long-unused birdbath fountain that was there and sat, oblivious to the cold, tasting at each other's lips while the snow fell around us.

Karen climbed into my lap and unzipped my jacket. She was two years older than I was, eighteen to my sixteen, but almost half my size, and she fit neatly inside the front of my parka, which I zipped halfway-up behind her. We sat like that for a few minutes, letting the heat between us build, and then Karen's breath was warm and sudden in my ear. "Do you trust me?" she asked again.

When I nodded my head, she told me to unzip my jacket. Then she pushed me till I was flat on my back, knelt between my legs, undid my pants, and slowly made love to me—it was the first time anyone ever had—with her mouth. The pleasure fused my flesh to hers, and for those moments I felt we were both me, and we were both her, and when it was over I felt open and vulnerable, grateful and shy, and I worried that maybe Karen hadn't liked what she saw when she drew me out of myself, but her eyes were tender

when I looked into them, and she held me in her hand, warming me against the cool night air till I grew soft. Then, the smell and taste of me still on her lips, she kissed my mouth and whispered in my ear, "You know, that took a lot of courage."

"Yes," I whispered back, choosing to hear in her words that courage had been required of both of us. She smiled and climbed on top of me. I wrapped my parka around her one more time, and we stayed like that until it was too cold to be outside any longer.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she said as we got up and kissed good-bye, and, just like in a movie, I stood there in the falling snow, my knees weak with pleasure and happiness, and I watched her walk back towards her building until the white curtain of flakes closed behind her, and it didn't occur to me that she'd just done what the old man in my building had said that he wanted to do, and I couldn't wait to see her again.

A month or so later, Karen came to visit me on a night that my mother wasn't home and I was taking care of my two younger sisters. They'd just gone to bed when she arrived, and we sat in the living room listening to music and talking. Once we were sure they were sleeping, we moved into my bedroom, where one thing led to our usual other, but this time, when Karen rolled me onto my back, instead of taking me in her mouth as she usually did, she climbed on top of me and began to slide her vagina up and down the length of my erection.

The warmth and wetness of coming so close to going all the way was tantalizing, but I still didn't want actually to do it, and I assumed—since Karen had not told me otherwise—that she still felt the same way as well. Karen was watching my face very closely, however, and I did not know how to read her expression. Then, she rubbed herself against a spot that made my hips jerk involuntarily, and I put my hands on either side of her waist to make sure she didn't fall off. As if that were a signal she'd been waiting for, she swiveled her own hips slightly, and, without warning, I was inside her, and all I was was pleasure and flesh, alive to the slightest nuance of her touch.

Much too soon, it was over. Smiling, Karen asked me how I felt.

"A little strange," I said. "I didn't really want to go that far."

"Then you should've said no," she responded, an edge of contempt creeping into her voice. "You should've made me stop."

As soon as those words left her mouth, I was sure that she'd lied about being a virgin.

"I thought you'd want to think that you were my first," she said. "That's what most guys want anyway." She'd been afraid to tell me the truth, she explained, because she was sure the truth would make me think she was a slut. The truth: She'd lost her virginity a few years before, when two men she barely knew got her drunk and fucked her several times each in a single night. "And don't bullshit me," the sarcasm dripped from her

words.. "You're no different from any other guy. You *wanted* to do that. You're just not man enough to admit it."

Given what I know now about rape, it wouldn't surprise me if Karen's story were indeed true, but at the time I was so angry and so hurt that I couldn't imagine she was doing anything other than trying to make her deception into something I could accept. I didn't care that she wasn't a virgin. I cared that she hadn't believed me when I said I wanted to stay one, and I cared that she'd lied to me about herself, and I felt manipulated and dirty and cheap. How could I trust her after this?

I told Karen I didn't want to see her anymore, and I didn't care that she didn't believe me when I said it had nothing to do with her virginity or how she said it had been taken from her. I hoped sincerely that when she left my house that night, she'd be walking out of my life for good. Some months later, though—I don't remember who called whom—she ended up at my house one afternoon when my mother and sisters weren't home. We were sitting on my bed talking, trying to find a way to patch things up, and then we were kissing, and then our clothes were off, and it was as if I'd never broken up with her. Then the urge came over me to be inside her again, and I climbed between her legs, clumsy with my own inexperience, and despite the fact that Karen tried to help me, what I had expected to be as smooth and effortless as it had been the first time became a struggle that embarrassed me, and I began to loathe myself for wanting her, this girl whom I realized I still didn't think I could trust, and yet the humiliation of giving up, of not being able to fuck her, was more than I thought I could bear and so I kept poking and pushing until, at last, I entered her.

I went into Karen that afternoon with anger and shame; there was no pleasure in it; it was over almost before it started; and the smile of cynical triumph I saw on her face when I pulled back made me feel like I might never want to have sex again—though of course I did. Sometimes it was great, transcendent even. Other times, it was simply fun; at others, mundane; and sometimes it came close to being as bad as it was that last time with Karen, and at those times I came away feeling guilty that I had played the role of the piston and the woman had been the casing it was my task to move in and out of. Sex is nothing if not unpredictable and inconsistent, and it is a lesson I have learned over and over again that the quality of our erotic relationships, if not of our lives as a whole, often depends on our willingness to roll with the sexual punches, hurting, being hurt, forgiving, understanding, learning, hoping and then, against all odds, making the effort once more to unearth the life-sustaining connection that lies waiting in the bodies of those who offer themselves to us, and that we in turn offer them, using our own bodies to make them welcome.

And so I have a wife and a son. And because sex is also always about so much more, is so much more, than what happens when people make love, I also have two female students whose trust in me, if only because of what they are writing about, is sexual by definition. For it matters that I am a man and that they are willing not merely to tell me about the abuse they suffered at the hands of men, but also to let me help them find the language with which they can give the experience back to themselves, and to the

readers they imagine, as something the meaning of which they have chosen, not the men who abused them and not the culture that forced them into silence about the abuse. It matters because, just like sex, teaching and learning are about desire and the fulfillment of desire. Certainly it is true that the trust my students have in me—and, to be honest, that I have in them—inverts the trust that lovers bring to the bed they share, i.e. that we will not sexualize our relationship. Nonetheless, it is a mistake to think that our relationship is not of the body. For to help someone understand themselves is by definition to help them understand how to live in their bodies.

## SEVEN

The students in a remedial composition class I'm teaching are reading aloud and commenting on fables they've written over the weekend. The prose is awkward and ungrammatical, but I'm impressed with the imaginative effort some have made. There's a modernized version of Little Red Riding Hood, set in an upper class neighborhood with the most sought-after senior boy in the local high school taking the part of the wolf. There's also a gender-reversed Sleeping Beauty, in which Princess Charming turns out to be the homeless woman who sleeps in the park. I'm about to move on to the next part of the lesson when Walter, who'd announced when we began that he wasn't going to read, asks if we'd like to hear his story. Of course I say yes.

At the center of Walter's narrative, which takes place far in the future, is a very powerful drug lord whose organization has been infiltrated by a top female narcotics agent posing as a prostitute. When the dealer's lover, who also works for him as a prostitute, learns that the operation has been compromised, she tells him immediately. The dealer conceives of a plan that uses his lover to expose the spy, who is then tortured slowly and painfully to death. To express his gratitude, the dealer takes his lover to bed, giving her, in Walter's words, "the literal fuck of her life, pounding away until she was no longer breathing." The story ends with a description of the lavish funeral the dealer gives her.

When Walter finishes reading, he looks around the circle with a sarcastic and self-satisfied grin. The rest of the class is silent, no one except me willing to meet his eyes, and I'm hoping that one of his peers will speak first, condemning what he's written not in the voice of authority—which my voice will inevitably be—but in the voice of his peers. A minute passes in silence before it becomes clear that his classmates don't intend to respond, and so I call on a few students by name, male and female, to see if I can draw them out. The men all say that the story is "sick," while the women tell me they think it's not even worth responding to. Yet it has to be responded to, and so I ask Walter if he really believes that fucking a woman to death could be an expression of gratitude.

"Of course," he says. "For the woman it's the ultimate fulfillment, and for the man it's the ultimate proof."

"Of what?" I ask him.

"Of manhood." His tone indicates that he's surprised I even have to ask. "Women would buy tickets and stand in line to be with a man powerful enough to fuck them like that." He says these words with a conviction I at first can't think how to counter, but then I wonder aloud if he would include his girlfriend or his future wife in that line of women.

"I'm not talking," he says, "about doing this to someone I love. I'm talking about the pieces of trash you can pick up at the local bar, the sluts who give it away, the hookers who do it for money, women who are asking for it."

"Why do they deserve to be murdered?" I ask.

"They're whores," he responds, "No one cares about them."

I take a different tack, asking him if he's ever killed anything other than an insect. When he says no, I ask him if he realizes that he's talking about using his own body, his penis specifically, as a murder weapon.

"Yes, I do," he says.

So I ask if he makes a distinction between the sex he would have for pleasure—presumably with a woman he loves—and the power he says he would like to experience of using sex to kill. Walter looks at me with a mixture of pity and contempt. "Power," he says, "*is* pleasure."

Class ends. As I'm putting my papers in my briefcase, Walter steps up to my desk. "Now that everyone else is gone," he says, his voice full of conspiratorial camaraderie, "come on, be honest. Wouldn't it feel great to take some slut to a hotel and then meet your buddies later and tell them you'd killed her with your dick?"

"No," is all I can think to say.

"Sure, okay maybe now that you're older and you can't get it up like you used to, but when you were younger, when you were an undergraduate, wasn't fucking something you did so you could share it with your buddies, and impress them, and wouldn't they have worshipped you if you told them you'd fucked someone to death?"

Since it's clear that Walter is interested less in reflecting on what he has to say than in "outing" me as "one of the boys," I decide that monosyllabic answers are the best way to deal with him. "No," I say again.

Walter waits a few seconds for me to say more. When I don't, he mutters something under his breath of which I think I hear the words *pathetic* and *excuse*, and then he walks out, and that's the last I see or hear of him until I get my final roster with a W for withdrawal next to his name.

Over the years, I've shared my encounter with Walter with friends and colleagues, male and female, and I've always found it interesting that their responses fall, for the most part, into the same two groups as the responses given by my students. On the one hand are those who dismiss Walter as "crazy," whatever they mean by that term; while on the other hand are those who see him as not worth taking the energy to respond to in the first place. The ease with which these responses are almost always given, however, never fails to make me uncomfortable. It's as if the people I'm talking to assume an *a priori* understanding of who Walter was, dismissing as irrelevant the question of *how* his life brought him to the point of feeling as he did. Yet it's precisely this question of *how* that continues to haunt me, not because I think answering it lets Walter off the hook, but because the interior experience that Walter claimed to have of his own genitals as a weapon feels as inaccessible to me as the interior experience of femaleness.

One of the letters from *Penthouse* magazine—I think it was from the "Happy Hooker" column—that has stayed with me since I first read it at least 20 years ago was written by a woman who claimed to be describing how she and a friend took revenge on a man who'd tried to rape the friend. The writer of the letter arranged to meet the man at a disco, invited him to her apartment, and seduced him into being tied spread-eagled to her bed. Then the woman's friend, who'd been waiting in another room, came in, and the two women teased the man sexually until he was begging them for release. In response, the women took out a razor and shaving cream, telling him that, if he ejaculated while they rubbed his penis, they would shave all the hair from his body. The letter went on to describe in great detail first the man's pleading with them not to do it and then his efforts to keep himself from coming while the women took turns masturbating him. Finally, of course, he came, and the women shaved him, threatening to slice off his testicles if he didn't lay still.

The woman's letter describes a rape. She didn't present it as anything else—except to make clear that it was motivated by revenge—and she never implied that the man enjoyed what she and her friend did to him. Nonetheless, my sexual imagination was drawn to the story. For months, for years afterward, I fantasized about women tying me to a bed and creating in my flesh an arousal so all-encompassing that I too would be willing to beg for release. Yet no matter how hard I tried to imagine a conclusion other than the one in the letter, I always ended up the victim of some version of the revenge the writer and her friend took. What I most identified with in this story, I think, what led me always away from the scenario I began with of trust in my imagined lovers and the pleasure they wanted to give me, was the man's experience of having the pleasures of his body turned against him, for I knew I could be shamed in that way as well, that my body was always the potential source of my own defeat.

A similar theme is played out in an episode of the long-and-deservedly-defunct TV series *She-Wolf Of London*: A very old man is brought into the hospital dying of unknown causes. The doctor on duty believes the old man is either senile or insane because he keeps insisting he is actually twenty-seven years old and that he was

turned into an old man by a woman. As the doctor leaves, he orders a nurse to give the old man a sedative. Once the nurse and the old man are alone, however, she unzips her uniform to reveal black-lace lingerie, and the old man recognizes her as the woman who has aged him—one of what the viewers will later learn is a group of succubae who have opened an escort service in England's capital city. As the old man looks on in helpless terror, the succubus begins to climb into the hospital bed where he is laying. As she does so, she reminds him in the voice of a predator enjoying the powerlessness of its prey that all he has to do is not want her and he will be able to live. All he has to do, in other words, is not have an erection and she will not be able to fuck him to death.

The story Walter told can be understood as a kind of pre-emptive strike against the fear of women expressed in this scene, as well as in my response to the *Penthouse* letter I described above. This understanding, however, is not the same thing as knowing *how* Walter and I—or at least I, since I cannot speak for Walter—came to feel this fear in the first place, and I'm focusing here on the question of *how* rather than *why* because it seems to me that *why* has already been answered, authoritatively and at length, by the women's movement: Men fear the power of women's freedom, sexual and otherwise, because the power of women's freedom, sexual and otherwise, represents the undoing of male dominant power and privilege and the corresponding collapse of the illusion of male invulnerability and the manhood men are expected to achieve in order to perpetuate that illusion.

I do not want to defend this fear because that inevitably means defending a cultural and socioeconomic and political pillar of male dominance, and yet I cannot help but ask, when you consider that pain, humiliation and/or subjugation are almost always the consequences for a man who has failed in his manhood, how it is any wonder that so many of us strive to use our bodies so that they can never be used against us?

## EIGHT

A colleague with whom I used to have lunch on a regular basis would occasionally bring her three-year-old son along. Usually, John was a very animated little boy, asking questions, making a mess, and doing in general what three-year-old boys do to maintain themselves as the focus of attention. On this particular afternoon, however, John sat next to his mother in absolute silence. Both of his hands were bandaged because of a fall he'd taken earlier in the day, and he was still in pain, which made it difficult for him to hold the small pieces his mother cut for him from the pizza we'd just ordered for lunch. From time to time, when the look of frustration on her son's face became especially acute, my friend would stop our conversation, pick up a small square of food, and hold it to his mouth, not continuing with what she'd been saying until he'd chewed and swallowed the whole thing. When we were done, and John stood up so his mother could put his coat on, he held his engauged palms out to her, silently asking for comfort. My friend squatted in front of her son and asked in a voice filled with empathy, "What's the matter, John? Does it hurt?" When John nodded his head in the affirmative, she stroked his cheek with her fingers and said, "I know, sweetie, but you're a man, right? You can take it." John set his mouth in a firm, thin line, and he again nodded his head up and down. Then his mother helped him slip his arms into the sleeves of his jacket, zipped him up, and motioned to me that we were ready to leave.

As we walked out, I thought of the countless times, and all the different, painful, and humiliating ways in which I was, in which John would be, in which boys routinely are, asked or told, implicitly or explicitly, by both men and women, boys and girls, "to take it." I'm not being melodramatic here. I have no doubt that my friend said what she said without even thinking about it, and I don't want to blow out of proportion this one clearly minor appeal to her son's manliness. The fact is, however, that she could have helped her son understand that we cannot always expect people to comfort us when we are in pain without putting his manhood at stake. Or, more to the point, she could have given him a hug without making any comment at all. That she did not—and I want to be clear that I am not saying my friend did anything wrong—that even in a situation as insignificant as this one, John's manhood became an issue, however small, indicates how deeply and unselfconsciously, perhaps even unwillingly, she valued the line separating the men from the boys.

Along the same lines, another friend told me not too long ago of the change she witnessed in her eleven-year-old son when she responded to his falling grades by explaining that when he got older he would have to support a family, just like his father, so he'd better start learning responsibility now. "All his boyish innocence," she said, "seems to be gone. Everything is homework, homework, homework. He doesn't even play with his toys anymore. I wanted to improve his grades, not turn him into a little man."

No doubt, and hopefully, if he has not done so already, this woman's son will eventually go back to being a kid just like any other kid, his mother's warning growing more and more faint as he begins to realize just how far off the adulthood she threatened him with really is. Indeed, my point here is not that either of these two boys was, in any substantive way, harmed by these interactions with their mothers, but rather that the interactions themselves represent only one small part of the manhood training boys receive and that each boy's response, even in such relatively minor situations, corresponded perfectly to the manhood ideal: he sucked it up and showed that he could "take it."

In *Love, Sex, Death and the Making of the Male*, Rosliand Miles points out that the old saying, "boys will be boys" can be read not only as it usually is, a statement of resignation in the face of inevitability, but also as an imperative: "Boys *will be* boys." The degree to which this reading is the more accurate one becomes fully evident when you look at the consequences of not "being a boy." Ask any man, and if he's honest enough to tell you, he will have at least one story, and probably more than one, of how he was hurt when he was a child for not being aggressive enough, athletic enough, stoic enough, sexually objectifying of girls enough, competitive enough, loyal enough to his buddies and so on. The hurt the man tells you about may have been physical, emotional or both; the particular story he tells you may involve something relatively minor, as in the case of the two boys I just told you about, or something deeply serious and even life threatening, like my friend who was sexually assaulted and raped by boys he'd thought were his friends because he was the weakest and least masculine among them.

Yet despite the radical distance we usually assume separates a victim from his or her victimizers, there is one aspect of his rape that my friend and those who raped him have in common, that all boys and men in our culture have in common: their ideas of themselves as men—and my friend's friends' behavior was nothing if it was not intimately connected to their ideas of themselves as men—are a direct result of their confrontation with the violence and aggression considered to be the normal, natural and necessary context in which manhood is formed. None of us can escape this. We may choose to embrace the violence or reject it; we may find some way of accommodating ourselves to it or we may devote our lives to eliminating it, but there is no way we can avoid confronting it. This confrontation takes place so pervasively throughout our lives—how *do* I respond to the posturing of the male student who is challenging me about not accepting his late paper; or to the neighbor whose threatening body language belies the polite tone of his voice as he argues with me about who saw the parking spot first; or to

my son's insistence that he wants a "boy's only" birthday party—that the question of how or why boys and men come to value manhood so highly seems dwarfed by the question Miles asks, "*[H]ow do they avoid it?*"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Rosalind Miles, *Love, Sex, Death, and the Making of the Male* (New York: Summit Books, 1991) 58. Author's italics.

## NINE

What first attracted me to Maria was the way she had no reservations about saying she didn't like Walt Whitman's poetry, even though our freshman-year literature professor had made Whitman's work central to the course. When I told her one day as we were walking out of class that I admired her honesty, she smiled, said something about how most literature professors had more hot air in them than substance, and walked off to wherever she had to go next. A few days later, when I saw her sitting alone in front of the library, the hello I stopped to say grew into an hour-long chat, and after that, for the next two months or so, we met a couple of times per week at a table in the back corner of the Rainy Night House Café, where we sat for hours drinking tea, eating bagels, and talking.

One afternoon, just as we were getting up to leave, Maria said she'd been given a bottle of good wine as a gift, and she asked if I would come to her room that evening to help her drink it. She was already several glasses ahead of me when I arrived, and while I played catch-up, our talk turned to a subject we'd never before discussed, love and relationships. We circled the question of our own budding involvement warily, letting it drop in and out of the conversation, each of us waiting for the other to risk saying, or doing, something first. Then Maria asked me, "Richard, do you like your body?"

"Yes," I answered, more because I couldn't imagine saying no than because I'd ever really thought about it, "why?"

She got down from her chair and sat cross-legged on the floor in front of me, "No, I mean do you *really* like your body?"

"Yes," I said again, but before I could ask if she liked hers as well, she leaned forward and asked her question even more emphatically, "Are you *truly* satisfied with *every* part of your body?"

Confused, and beginning to feel a little threatened, I allowed a small edge of anger to sharpen my voice, "What are you talking about?"

Maria smiled to herself, put her hand warmly on my knee, and said, "You know, do you think you *measure up* physically?"

Finally I understood, or at least I thought I did. As I imagine most young men do at one time or another, I'd taken a ruler to my penis to see if it was "big enough," though the only standard I had to compare myself to was the, as I remember it, average nine-inch penis of the men who appeared in *Penthouse's* letters. I did not "measure up." I won't deny I sometimes wished to be as big as the men I read about, but I also neither understood nor fully believed the relationship the letters in *Penthouse* asserted between the size of a man's penis, the pleasure he was able to give his partner in sex and/or the desirability she saw in him in the first place. Frankly, the idea that penis size could matter so much seemed as absurd to me as the life-or-death matter breast size so often seemed to be for my male friends when they talked about the women they were attracted to.

Yet here was a woman, clearly interested in me sexually, who wanted to know how I felt about the size of my penis. Looking back, I can smile thinking that perhaps her question was an honest one asked at precisely the wrong moment. At the time, however, all I felt was confusion. At least implicitly, Maria's question shifted the subtext of what was happening between us from the mutuality of friendship to the adversarial stance of performer and critic. Anything I said—yes, no, maybe, let's find out—was a picking up of the gauntlet she'd thrown down. On the other hand, to say nothing was probably to lose my chance to be with her, and I *really* wanted to be with her. So I decided to turn the tables. "I don't know," I said. "Do *you* measure up?" I asked her.

Maria's face changed immediately. The gently mocking anticipation with which she'd been waiting for my response vanished, and she searched my face with eyes that were suddenly sad and deeply suspicious. She kept her hand on my knee until she found, or didn't find, what she was looking for, and then, so softly that I almost couldn't hear her, she said, "Sometimes."

Maria got up and went back to her chair. We talked a while longer, trying to recapture the easy banter from earlier in the evening, but Maria was suddenly unable to look me in the face, and when I finally stood up to leave, all she did was wave a silent good-bye from where she was sitting. We saw each other on campus a few times after that but never said more than hello, and Maria only had once to turn and walk the other way as I approached for me to understand that she didn't want to talk to me again.

When I went home at the end of the semester, I told my mother what had happened and I asked her to help me understand Maria's behavior. Her answer only confused me more. "The size of a man's ego," my mother said, "can be measured by the size of his penis." To illustrate her point, she told me a story about a man who tried to pick her up in a bar she'd gone to with her friends. At first, she refused him politely, but as he grew more and more insistent, she grew more and more annoyed until, having had enough, loudly, so that the people around them could hear, offered him the following challenge. If he had a "baseball bat" between his legs, she'd be his for the night. If he didn't, he

should just leave her alone. The man protested that he'd "never had any complaints," but, my mother said, she slapped her palm on the bar and told him that if he had what it would take to have her, she wanted to see it right then and there. If he didn't, enough said.

Needless to say, the man walked away.

"Only small men," my mother's tone suggested this was her final word on the subject, "say that size doesn't matter."

While my mother's statements about men and penis size, and the story she told me to illustrate her point, are easy enough to understand as an expression of her anger at men, not only could I not imagine at the time what she was trying to tell me, but even now I have difficulty holding onto a logic she might have used to explain how what she said was an appropriate answer to my question. Did she think she was in some way siding with Maria? And if she was, what did she think she was siding with Maria against? Did she think of her story as a cautionary tale, a warning not to be a man like the man she had rejected in the bar? Or did she intend her story as a reality check, a way of telling me that I was already the man in the bar and I just needed to be honest about whether I measured up to what certain women would require of me? Or maybe it was all of these, or none of them; maybe my mother was not paying attention to the fact that I was a young man looking for guidance and just wanted to share what she thought was a funny story, almost as if I were one of her girlfriends, I don't know, but as I am writing this three scenes from when I was a teenager come back to me:

One: My mother standing in my bedroom doorway, her hand still on the doorknob she turned without knocking first. I am frozen in naked profile in the center of my room, trying desperately with my hands to hid my morning erection.

Two: Some time later, though I don't know how long, leaving the mall with my mother, I tell her I want an organ for my birthday. "Why?" she asks. "You already have a fine one of your own."

Three: It's Thanksgiving or Passover, one of the holidays when my family gathered at my grandmother's house. We're sitting at the table after dinner. "Next time," my mother is laughing—but the smile on her face is a thin line of contempt, and when she leans forward to tap the polished nail of her right index finger in rhythmic emphasis on the wooden surface of the dining room table, her eyes smolder—"Next time, tell your father you don't have such problems. Tell him you wear a steel jockstrap." I am sixteen, just home from a visit to my father in Manhattan, and I have just shared with my mother his first and only attempt at a father-son talk with me about women and sex. Walking from the restaurant where he'd taken me for lunch to the subway where I would catch the train home, he'd put his arm intimately around my shoulder, leaned his head in towards mine, and asked, "Do you have a girl friend?" I told him no, which was a lie. "Well," he responded, "you will soon, and once you start dating, you're going to run into situations you won't know how to handle." He moved a few steps ahead and turned to face me,

searching my eyes to make sure I knew what he was talking about. "I just want you to know you can call me."

"I know," I said, and the look of relief on his face as he quickly changed the subject to how I was doing in school made me want to laugh out loud. There was no way he could've known that I'd already lost my virginity, but knowing that he didn't know and realizing how easy it had been to deceive him made me feel superior, and it was this feeling of superiority that I brought to the table when I told my mother the story. "What does he think he's going to teach you, anyway?" she asks, letting her smile loosen into a softer, more conspiratorial grin. "You probably know more than he does already." She laughs again, and this time I laugh with her, more because it is what I think she expects than because I think what she's just said is really funny. Something in her tone makes me uneasy, though I am not quite sure how to name it yet.

The conversation continues, and my mother—I don't remember precisely how—comes back once more to the image of the steel jockstrap, and I realize what it is. My mother does not want me to grow up to be like my father, not just in terms of the character traits she finds so objectionable in him, but in terms of his body as well, which there is nothing I can do to prevent. I am, I am becoming, I will be, physically, sexually, a man, and she and I will have to face each other across the unbridgeable span of that difference for the rest of our lives. The enormity of this thought, however, is more than I can bear and so I push it away from me, and I laugh again at whatever she says, as if I am completely on my mother's side, but somewhere inside me I am sure—though I will not presume now to say that I was right about my mother's feelings in this—that even though a man is what I have no choice but to become, a man is precisely what my mother does not want me to be.

## TEN

I was not completely honest before when I said Walter's experience of his genitals as a weapon felt to me as inaccessible as the interior experience of femaleness: I'll call her Vanessa. We knew each other from I don't remember which class but I do remember that it was on the pretext of talking about this class that we stepped away from the crowd into an out-of-the-way corner of the dorm lobby where the party was being held. We were both drunk, both relatively new to the college—I as a first semester sophomore; she as a returning older student—and I think it was while we were comparing reactions to that day's lecture that we started making out. She was only an inch or so shorter than my six-foot-one and not really attractive to me, but I was clearly attractive to her and when she made the first move, being able for a change to put my arms around and kiss a woman without bending down was a new, strangely erotic experience.

After what felt like an hour but was probably only about fifteen or twenty minutes, she put her hand to my crotch, cupped my erection through my jeans and led me by the hand to one of the dorm's basement rooms. She looped a red rubber band around the doorknob so others would know someone was in there. I reached for the light switch, but she whispered, "No, it's better in the dark." What happened next is a little hazy in my memory. I know she refused to take her clothes off completely, and I remember kneeling between her legs, her pants still around her ankles, and trying unsuccessfully to find an angle at which my penis would slip into her. I know she told me it would be better if she got on top, which she did, with her pants still around her ankles, and I know she managed to find an angle and a rhythm at which to fuck me till I came. It was the most awkward and unsatisfying sex I've ever had. I don't know if she had an orgasm; I don't know if she cared; but when we said goodbye, promising at her insistence not to avoid each other if we happened to meet on campus, I know I was grateful the odds were against that happening.

When I got back to my room and undressed for bed, I found myself covered with what I assumed—since it did not occur to me that Vanessa might have been a virgin—was menstrual blood. I took a shower, went to sleep, and thought no more about it until two or three months later when Vanessa called to tell me she'd been in the hospital. "I don't

hold you responsible," she said, "and I don't expect you to pay for anything, but I almost bled to death after we had sex. I thought you ought to know." I don't remember precisely which part of her insides she said had been ruptured, but she said there was no question—according to her the doctors thought it the most likely explanation—I'd put a hole in her that night.

Too shocked even to wonder if she was telling the truth, I stood there thinking, So this is why she stopped coming to class. What followed was not more than three or so minutes of small talk—"I'm glad you're okay...Of course I remember. I won't avoid you. Really, I won't."—and we said goodbye and hung up. For the next few days, I walked around not knowing how to feel about myself. I wasn't smart enough yet to see how profoundly manipulative Vanessa's method of telling me had been, but the more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me that if I had punctured her, one of us, certainly she, should have felt something unusual, discomfort at least, if not outright pain, and yet, except for wanting to be on top, she'd given no indication that she'd felt either. And yet on the other hand, why would she lie? To this day, I am haunted by the possibility that she didn't, that I had, with my body, reached into her body and almost killed her.

We met on campus twice after that phone conversation, but it was so unavoidably clear the first time that we had nothing to say to each other—beyond my asking how she was healing—that the next time we could've stopped to chat, we turned in silent but mutual agreement and walked away in opposite directions.

*The fundamentally alien universe that the female experience of sex is to me.* To this day I have no idea if Vanessa was telling the truth, though I have recently learned that it's possible she was. One of my wife's relatives told me that the same thing happened to friend of hers who'd almost bled to death after an internal rupture caused by having sex with her boyfriend. What I do know is that I have tended to think of intercourse ever since as an activity fraught with danger, in which I had to be especially careful lest I do serious damage to the woman I am with. For there is no way to escape the fact that it is always, *always*, my body inside hers—whoever she is—and that this arrangement of flesh and blood and muscle makes her physically vulnerable in ways that, by definition, I will never be; and so it occurs to me that there's something wrong with saying that two people *have* sex, as if sex were something outside themselves, like food, that they agree to share. For the sex they *have*, that *we* have is always already in our bodies, and so what happens when we take off our clothes and move in and out of and over and under each other in search of whatever our desire for sex has sent us in search of is more accurately described as sharing, a giving and taking and giving back, which means you are never the same person when sex is over as you were before it began. The only question is whether you're willing to admit it and live honestly with the consequences.

## ELEVEN

I watch my wife as she snuggles and kisses and playfully fondles our son's body, eliciting from him giggles of delight, and I wonder how he experiences the attention she pays to his penis. Not that there's even a hint of anything inappropriately sexual in the way she touches him, and not that I have any fear about her crossing the line into inappropriateness, but so much of adult sexuality, especially adult male sexuality, is focused on our genitals, and so unthinkingly do we impose the norms and values of adult sexuality on the eroticism of children—which we fear but do not want to admit that we fear—that it's almost impossible not to see in the way my wife plays with my son the shadow of what it would mean if the way she touched him ever did become inappropriate. As Rosalind Miles suggests, however, appropriateness—which is always a matter of culture anyway—may be entirely beside the point. A mother's touch on her son's genitals, she writes, with the understanding that she's talking about something other than an act of cleansing or instruction in personal hygiene, "does not merely awaken the male sense of self, but *locates* it, ensuring that for the rest of his life his penis incorporates his essence and identity: that he *is* his penis."<sup>5</sup>

I watch my wife and my son and I think how easy it is to think Miles is right. My son plays a game, for example, in which he sits naked on my wife's face, clearly a strategy for getting his penis as close to her mouth as possible, and there are other times when he has asked openly for her to kiss him there, but then I remember that she also pays a great deal of attention to and that he asks her regularly to kiss and snuggle other parts of his body as well—feet, belly, neck, butt, ears, hands and more—and I have to wonder if he makes the distinction that Miles suggests he does between his penis and those other parts of his body.

To be fair, though, Miles is talking about a kind of touching that has a lot more in common with adult lovemaking than the play in which my wife and son engage, a "stroking, petting or playing with the child's genitals [that] has the effect of harnessing all his restless energy, focusing it on [his mother or mother figure] and soothing his aggression, irritability or distress." Miles describes this practice under the harem

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<sup>5</sup> Rosalind Miles, *Love, Sex, Death, and the Making of the Male* (New York: Summit Books, 1991) 38.

system, when boys sometimes remained in the harem with their mothers until they were as old as twelve, and during the British colonial rule in India, when children were cared for by native female servants known as *ayah* or *amah*, and she quotes a Brigadier James Faulder, who recounts how his Nanny Phillips used to "put Peter to bed" that way<sup>6</sup>—a practice that, whatever else it may be about, is clearly not an expression of a parent's delight in his or her child's physical existence.

I watch my wife playing with my son, and I envy the uninhibited familiarity they enjoy. For while I kiss and snuggle and fondle him in much the same way she does, I generally avoid his penis. Not that I'm squeamish. When it comes to changing his diaper or washing him in the bath I have no problem handling or otherwise paying attention to his genitals, but the idea of kissing or snuggling or fondling him there inevitably conjures for me the images and feelings of my own sexual abuse, and so the touch itself is for me never innocent no matter how innocently it may be intended or received. This reticence on my part saddens me, for I do not believe that my son does not notice it. Nor do I think that the lesson it teaches him is a good one, though I of course have no way of knowing what that lesson might be. I take comfort, though, that the time will come when my son has the language and the desire to talk about what it is to live in this male flesh we have in common. For in language, at least, I know I can touch him without the corrupting shame of my own abuse, for in language, at least, *through* language, I have begun to render myself free and unashamed.

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<sup>6</sup> Rosalind Miles, *Love, Sex, Death, and the Making of the Male* (New York: Summit Books, 1991) 35

## TWELVE

I was in my twenties when the leader of a training session at the summer camp where I worked told us he would use *she* as the generic pronoun when discussing campers who might choose to tell us they'd been sexually abused. Since most abuse happened to girls, he explained, referring to both boys and girls as victims would give us a skewed picture of reality. I'd been doing some reading and I knew that, statistically speaking, he was correct. Estimates placed the number of girls who'd been sexually abused at one in three, while the number of boys was thought to be one in seven. Those numbers meant, however, that every male counselor in the camp whose group had more than six boys, which meant every male counselor in the camp, could reasonably assume that at least one of his campers had a story of abuse to tell.

Nor, according to those numbers, could I have been the only male on staff who'd had such an experience.

The session leader spoke with such authority, however, that I did not know how to challenge him, and so I said nothing.

After the session was over, furious that I had allowed myself to be so easily silenced, I went back to my room and reread a passage I'd found in Adrienne Rich's essay called "Caryatid: Two Columns," from her book *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*.

[T]aught to view our bodies as our totality, our genitals as our chief source of fascination and value, many women have become dissociated from their own bodies...viewing themselves as objects to be possessed by men rather than as the subjects of an existence.

Each time I read those words, the voice of the old man in my building came back to me, telling me again about the beauty and size of my penis. This time, though, instead of the silence with which I'd answered him all those years before, I heard in my head a small tentative voice clearing its throat, gathering the courage to speak. "But what about me?" it asked. "What about what happened to me?"

Yet even as successive readings of that essay, along with the other pieces in Rich's book, offered me a way to begin to name my own experience, it also identified me as a man with the same power and privilege that the men who abused me had used to abuse me:

Rape is the ultimate outward physical act of coercion and depersonalization practiced on women by men. Most male readers...would perhaps deny having gone so far: the honest would admit to fantasies, urges of lust and hatred, or lust and fear, or to a "harmless" fascination with pornography and sadistic art.

I was fascinated by pornography; I had fantasies that combined lust and fear; and it was impossible to miss the cynical accusation in Rich's use of the word "perhaps." The message was clear. Whatever else might have been true about who I was, I was also, by definition, the enemy, and I did not know how to speak at one and the same time as both a survivor of male sexual violence and someone who participated in it, however unintentionally and/or vicariously. So I remained silent when that session leader said what he said, which is precisely what I've been trying not to do here. It's astonishing to me, though, that after all I've said so far, after having spent most of my adult life arriving at the point where I feel strong enough to say the things I've said so far, I am reluctant to tell you what comes next—not "next" in the chronological sense, since it's actually something that happened years before I started working at summer camp, but "next" in the sense that nothing I say from this point on will be truly comprehensible if I don't tell you.

What I fear is that I'll start to sound like one of those TV-talk-show guests who recites a litany of abuse so overpowering in its horror that speechlessness is the only adequate response. Indeed, when I was younger, one of those TV talk show guests was exactly what I wanted to be. I wanted a forum in which to tell my story and to make pronouncements about its meaning, and I wanted the moral authority of my suffering, hammered into an inescapable reality through the narrative piling up of injustice upon injustice, to render my pronouncements unassailable by any logic other than my own. I was enraged, and I wanted my rage to be the center of the world, or of my world at least, and so I told people about the old man in my building, and I told them about the second man who molested me—which is the story I will tell you in a moment—and I told them as well that the story I've told you about how I lost my virginity was actually the story of a date rape.

I came to this understanding of what happened between Beth and me when a female friend pointed out that if I'd been a woman and Beth a man any accusation of date rape I might have wanted to bring would not only have been taken seriously, but would also very likely have stuck. My friend, of course, was applying a standard—that only an explicitly stated yes should be taken as permission to engage in sexual activity—which did not exist when Beth and I had sex. Nonetheless, I eagerly adopted my friend's understanding of what had happened—for Beth did, after all, use the oh-so-typically-male strategy of blaming me for what she'd done—transforming myself, at least in my

own imagination, into a male version of the women to whom Robin Warshaw gives voice in the title of her book *I Never Called It Rape*. I wanted to be, and I wanted the world to see me as, the ultimate victim, exploited by both men and women, existing outside the terms and categories of analysis employed by writers like Adrienne Rich, and therefore resembling my abusers not at all.

Over time, however, it became more and more difficult to understand the sex I had with Beth in such simplistic and even reductive terms. For to call Beth a rapist is to suggest that she was no different from the men who molested me and that the sex she and I had was in some way a violence I survived in the same way that I survived the "attentions" of those two men—and this is an analysis I can no longer accept. My abusers were predators, and if I have come to understand anything at all about what happened that night with Beth, it is that initiation, not predation, was what she had in mind. Not that this excuses the way she disregarded what I said I wanted or, rather, didn't want, but if I think in stereotypical terms, I can understand what she might have been thinking: What teenage boy would not want an older, more experienced girl to have sex with for his first time? What boy in his right mind would say no to such an opportunity, or really mean it if he said it?

I remember not long after it happened telling a good friend, a girl my age, that I'd lost my virginity. What I wanted was to talk about how badly I felt, but the first word out of my friend's mouth was *Congratulations!* and she did not believe me when I told her congratulations were not what I was looking for. "You've had what every guy our age wants—at least the ones I know," she said. "So don't bullshit me with false regret! You feel like a 'real man' now and you know it, so you might as well admit it." What I knew was that I felt anything but like a man, but I did not know how to respond, and so I remained silent.

Another, perhaps simpler, reason why I'm reluctant to tell the story of the second man who sexually abused me is that it raises the question of why, having been through the experience once, I let it happen again, neither resisting on my own nor telling anyone else what was happening. I don't mean, or at least I don't think I mean, that I blame myself for not saying anything. I understand very well the silencing nature of abuse, and I know that I was abused at a time when the abuse of boys was barely recognized, and that it can take years, a lifetime even, before a survivor of abuse feels strong enough to speak up. So, no, I don't think I blame myself, at least not anymore, for not saying anything at the time, but the question of why I remained silent then does raise for me now the further question of whom I've chosen to tell over the years and why.

When one of my independent study students, for example, first started to write about her own abuse, and she was struggling with how to shape that experience in language, feeling and fearing her own inadequacy, since the struggle was far more difficult than she'd ever expected it to be, it took me a full day to decide to share with her the fact that I too had been abused and that more than a decade separated the day I first started to write about it and the day I knew I'd gotten it right. And yet if she hadn't been my student, I would've told her without giving it a second thought. And I think also about

who I am in my role as a husband and a father, as a friend, and even as a citizen, and about the authority and respect and vulnerability I experience in those roles, and I realize that what it means to tell someone I've been sexually abused is, or should be, the same thing as what it means to tell someone that I am opposed to injustice, and I know I have not always lived my life according to this principle, and so I have to ask: What has been at stake for me in my own silences?

## THIRTEEN

For a fat man, Bill Glasser moved well, and he was funny, and I followed him with jokes I modeled after his around the catering hall where he was the head waiter and I was a busboy. Sometimes he let me stay late after a party to help with the last bit of cleaning up in the kitchen. Or at least that's how I remember it. I felt so privileged to spend time with him that even if he'd *told* me to stay it would've seemed more like a gift than a command. While he scrubbed pots and I swept and mopped the floor, he asked me questions about myself. The more he asked, the more I talked, and the more I talked the more I trusted him, and when I confided that I'd started lifting weights because I wanted to be stronger than I was, he offered to teach me exercises, using only my body and the wall, that he said would increase the weight training's effectiveness.

"Most guys your age who lift," he said, as he guided me out of the kitchen and back into the ballroom, "neglect the lower body. You need to work your legs and lower back as much as your chest and your biceps."

He told me to face the wall and put my palms flat against the wood grain paneling. "Now," he instructed, "stand on your toes." When I did, he touched my calves, thighs, and buttocks with the tip of his finger. "Do you feel it?" he asked. "The tightness? Here, here, and here? Do as many of these as you can every night before you go to bed."

The next time I saw him, he asked me to demonstrate the exercise for him so he could check my form before showing me something new. This time, as I stood on my toes, he put his knee between my upper thighs and spread them slightly. "Your feet," he said, "need to be exactly shoulder-width apart." When he was satisfied that I had the proper form, he showed me another exercise, a kind of deep knee-bend, which I practiced at home together with the toe lifts, trying to perfect them both for the next time I would be tested.

That New Years Eve, we had to work two jobs in a row, a party that didn't finish until three or four in the morning, and a New Year's Day wedding for which we had to report some hours later. When the first party was over, Bill drove me home so I could shower and nap for an hour or two while he went to his house and did the same. Then he

picked me up to take me to the wedding. He and I were the first two members of the crew to arrive, and as we were setting up the tables in the main room, I complained that I was falling asleep on my feet. Bill motioned me over to where he was standing and gave me two white pills wrapped in aluminum foil. "These'll help you stay awake," he said, "but only take one at a time." I took one right away and sped through the wedding reception as if I'd never need to sleep again. When I got home I still had enough energy left over to clean my room twice, walk the dog three times, and read most of a book my high school English class had been assigned to finish over the Christmas break and that I'd left till the last minute.

Two weeks later, Bill pulled me aside as we set up for another job. "You know," he said, "those Black Beauties were expensive. Don't you think you ought to give me something for them?" I laughed the question off. After all, this was Bill, a man I'd taken as my friend and mentor. I couldn't imagine he'd really put a price on something he'd given me.

Around this time, Bill hired a bartender whose name I've forgotten, but whose face I remember having the weathered good looks of someone like Harrison Ford. My job was to help him—I'll call him Michael—set the bar up before parties and then break it down after the guests were gone. Once I asked him what his job was during the day.

"Well," he said with a smile, "I used to be a cop, but they kicked me off the force."

"Why?"

"They had their reasons," was all he would say. Then he changed the subject, "Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Yes," I said.

"What's her name?"

"Beth."

"How long have you been going out?"

"About six months."

"At sixteen years old," he responded, "that must seem like an awfully long time."

I agreed that it did.

When it was time to leave, because I had more to say and I wanted to say it to him, I asked Michael if there was some place we could go to talk more. He smiled, "Sure, come on."

He took me to a bar called the Betsy Ross, where we sat in a booth against the back wall. I know we started to talk about Beth, but I remember nothing of our conversation because my attention was immediately riveted by two men who got up to dance. They each wore white, hip-hugging pants and skin-tight pastel shirts, and they wove their bodies together in movements far more erotic than any I'd ever seen men and women do together. Michael reached across the table and tapped me on the shoulder, "Richard, you realize you're in a gay bar, right?"

"I do now," I said.

"And that's okay?"

I nodded my head.

"I knew you'd be cool about it," Michael said, and he reached out and put his palm flat against my right cheek. "I'm not a cop anymore," he smiled sadly, "because I'm gay and I refused to hide it, and the law says if you're gay, you can't be a cop."

I liked Michael tremendously, and so I wish I could say that his revelation made me sad or angry, but I was more interested in watching the dancers. I was fascinated that men could be that gentle with each other, that physically intimate, and I wondered what it would be like to move that way with a friend.

A few weeks later, Bill turned to me as we were riding in his car on the way to a job, "I heard you and Michael went to the Betsy Ross after the last party."

"We did," I said. "I had a good time."

"That's good," Bill looked quickly over at me, then turned his attention back to the road. "Yeah, a blow job every once in a while will do you good."

The edge of accusation in Bill's voice took me completely by surprise. Not only had Michael not given me a blow job, but I couldn't imagine why the thought would even cross Bill's mind. Too shocked to respond, I said nothing, and we rode the rest of the way in silence.

When the party was over, after the rest of the crew had left, Bill wondered if I'd been doing the exercises he taught me. When I said yes, he asked me to show him. So I turned my back and stood with my palms against the nearest wall. As I began to rise on my toes, however, Bill cupped his hands over my butt. Every muscle in my body froze as he caressed me, gently kneading each cheek and bringing his mouth to just behind my ear, "You know, you have a dancer's cheeks, small and firm. Someday someone'll teach you how to use them."

The moment lasted for just a few seconds, and then Bill let me go, and I started to walk back to the tables I hadn't finished cleaning yet, my response identical to the one I'd had

when the old man cornered me in the lobby of my building: behave as if nothing had happened. But then, with pinpoint accuracy, taking me completely by surprise, Bill rushed up behind me and clamped his fingers onto my perineum, pushing me on tiptoe across the floor. "Do you like to dance?" he asked rhetorically. "Dance for me!"

I clamped down on the scream that gathered in my gut and let the grip of his fingers guide, and I kept letting him guide me each time he did that, and had he wanted to, I probably would've let him do more, because I didn't know how to tell him to stop, as if being used was what my body had been born for.

## FOURTEEN

I liked Mark a lot, though you know that's not his real name, and because of a confidence I still feel bound to keep all these years later, I will say he was a friend of friends I'd gone to San Francisco to visit when I was in my late twenties. He'd offered us his home as a place to spend the night as we traveled south to a town where another friend had rented a house for the summer. We arrived just before dinner, and I enjoyed watching the easy familiarity with which Mark and my friends interacted as they prepared the meal, which lasted long enough that some of us were still eating while others went upstairs to go to sleep. Those of us who were still awake kept talking and eating and drifting off until Mark and I were the only ones in the room. He asked me where I'd met our sleeping friends, how long it had been since I'd seen them last, and then we talked about art and music and writing, and he told me how he'd spent a year not too long ago traveling across the country. Then he asked me if I had a girlfriend. When I told him no, he fell silent, turning his face to the wall.

"You know," he said, "I'm gay."

"So?" It was the first response that came to my mind.

Mark let out a laugh that I thought would wake everybody in the house. "Tell me, do you know what it means to desire men?"

It was both a question and a challenge, and a shiver of fear and anticipation ran through me as I wondered where this conversation was going to take us. The lines I'd written years before while sitting in the library trying to make sense of the vision I'd had of myself beating Beth senseless—*a bearded man, shirtless, in faded jeans...take me in his mouth*—came to me suddenly. "Yes," I answered.

"And yet you have been with women." Again, there was a challenge in his voice.

"Yes."

"So you are bisexual." It was a statement, not a question, and the matter-of-factness in Mark's voice took me a little by surprise.

"I *guess so*." I stressed the last two syllables to make it sound like this was something that didn't need to be said, but the reality was that during the previous few years my sexuality had become a source of real anxiety for me. I'd found myself fantasizing more and more about having sex with men, sometimes even with men I knew. It wasn't something I felt compelled to act on, and I will not say I was not a little bit afraid of it—and so I had not really tried to figure it out in any conscious and explicit way—but I had come to accept it as part of what went on inside me sexually. So what was really true was that sometimes I felt straight and sometimes I felt gay and sometimes I felt bi, but I wasn't ready to share that uncertainty with Mark, especially as it became clear to me that he wanted to seduce me.

"Have you been with a man?" He sounded like he expected me to say no.

"Not yet."

"Why not?"

"It just hasn't happened yet."

"Then how can you say you're bi?"

"I know what I feel." At this point I was as much challenging Mark as he was challenging me.

"And that's enough?"

"For now, yes, that's enough."

"I envy you," he said. "To be so sure of what you feel, of who and what you want...you have no idea how lucky you are!" Then, the desperation in his voice painful to hear, he asked me, "Can you imagine what it means to look into the eyes of your lover as he takes your orgasm in his mouth and not merely see the face of your mother staring back at you, but to think, to feel, *to know*, it is her body into which your own body is pouring? How do you tell this man that you love him? How do you know it is him you really love?"

In the silence that descended between us, Mark smiled a small, bitter smile and lit a cigarette. While I stared into my wine glass trying to think of something to say, he got up, walked over to the stereo, put on a tape of Simon and Garfunkel's *Greatest Hits*, and, with his eyebrows raised in a question his grin said he thought he already knew the answer to, he sat in my lap and put his head on my shoulder. I held him silently, with my eyes closed, until the shock of his nibbling gently at the arch of my ear pulled air into me in a gasp that he used to turn my face to his and put his lips against mine. He was tender and tentative, and I lost myself in the taste and the smell and the touch of him.

The next moment, however, trying to sweep me up in the force of his desire, he wedged my lips open and filled my mouth with his tongue. Mark was a small man, so it was easy to hold him back while I tried to explain that he was moving too quickly and trying too hard.

"Fine," he said and stood up. "Your bed is upstairs. Sleep well." Before I could say another word, he turned, walked quickly through the door of his room and closed it behind him. I sat there for a few minutes more, decided against going after him, and went upstairs to sleep.

A gentle nudge woke me. When I stirred, Mark rolled himself naked into my arms. His erection was warm and insistent against my leg, and without being fully aware yet of where I was or what was happening, I reached down and wrapped my hand around his penis. I thrilled at how alive this part of him felt, at the contrast between the hardness of the organ and the smooth softness of the skin that covered it. I reached further down and cupped his testicles in my palm. They too were soft, but Mark took my hand in his own and said, "This is wrong. Let *me* love *you*. Isn't that what you want?"

And suddenly I was very far away. Something in the intonation of his voice, the stress he put on the words "me" and "you"—I probably will never know exactly what it was—but I was in that moment once again thirteen years old, sitting on the bed in the old man's apartment with my pants down around my ankles, and the lust in his eyes, and the calculated honesty of the concern in his voice, *But don't you want me to love you?* And I knew Mark was not trying to abuse me, but I could not stop the rage that was rising in my chest. I took his head forcefully between my hands, looked him steadily in the eye, and said as calmly as I could, "I don't want to do this now."

Fortunately, for I think I would have hurt him otherwise, Mark saw that I was serious and went, with apologies, back to his room. The next morning when I woke up, he and my friends were already finishing breakfast. After they left the kitchen, Mark and I had a few moments alone, and I tried to explain why I pushed him away, but he wouldn't let me. "Don't worry," he said, "It's over. We won't see each other again, so there's no need for platitudes or excuses." I went upstairs and packed my things, waved good-bye from the back of the car we'd rented to take us on the next leg of our journey, and he was right: We've neither seen nor spoken to each other since.

I spent most of that afternoon in the garden of my friend Elizabeth's rented house, sitting in the shiver of my own self-disgust, wishing I were a snake so I could shed the skin Mark had touched. I wasn't ashamed of having wanted him or of anything we did or might've done had we gone further, but I was ashamed of having remembered the old man, of the way I'd remembered the old man, and of still being afraid, and of how close I'd come to hurting Mark for something about which he could not possibly have known. The irony, of course, was that Mark—whose orgasm for whatever reason triggered in him the hallucination that it was actually his mother with whom he was making love—was one of the few people who'd have understood, really understood, what happened in my head to make me push him away—and then I realized even more than I'd been

ready to want Mark physically the night before, I'd wanted to tell him the morning after. Not because telling him would have made it possible for us to make love, but because it might have earned me his companionship and understanding, and yet I also have to admit that part of why I wanted his companionship and understanding was because when I held his penis and cupped his testicles, I knew—or at least I imagined that I knew—exactly what my touch felt like to him. The landscape of his body seemed as familiar to me in that moment as the landscape of my own, and the power of knowing this felt to me like the power not to be lost anymore, as I had all too often been lost trying to love in the landscape of the bodies of women.

## FIFTEEN

"But," Beth leaned forward and whispered through clenched teeth, "you just said you were falling in love with me!?"

"I did, I am," I stammered, "but—"

"Then why don't you want to sleep with me anymore?"

"I didn't say that."

"Yes you did! You just said you wanted to stop having sex."

What I had said was that I wanted to stop having intercourse and, frankly, I didn't understand why this was such a big deal. We'd been, or at least I thought we'd been, more than happy with the sex we were having before she decided she was ready to lose her virginity and I didn't see why that kind of sex would be any less satisfying now.

Beth wasn't having any of it, though. The more I tried to tell her I was not trying to kick her out of my bed or my life, the more she seemed to think that was precisely what I was trying to do. It was as if she all-of-a-sudden couldn't imagine sex without genital penetration, or as if penetration were a right I was trying to deprive her of and that she had to fight like hell to preserve. Or, though this only occurred to me later, as if she thought I was lying through my teeth.

The argument had started when I asked Beth what she thought she would do if she got pregnant. I was twenty one, she was twenty—this was two or three years before the episode I told you about earlier, when I imagined myself beating her up—and we were sitting huddled over the last spoonfuls of the sundaes we'd ordered at the Friendly's restaurant where her sister worked.

"So, what do you think you'd do?" I asked, pressing to break the silence which had been her initial response.

"I don't know," she said.

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"I don't know...I've never thought about it."

"How could you not have thought about it? You're the one who *gets* pregnant!"

"*Look, I said I don't know!* Why are you asking me anyway?"

I was asking because of the last word had by a fifteen-year-old girl in the youth group discussion I'd been leading about premarital sex the day before I drove up to Beth's house to spend the weekend the first night of which our argument had already ruined: "I think," this girl had said, "that there's nothing wrong with having sex outside of marriage and nothing wrong with not having sex, but, if two people *are* going to have sex, they damned well better talk about what they think they'll do if the woman gets pregnant." The girl's name, if I remember correctly, was Courtney, and I remember that I stared at her speechless for about ten seconds before I declared the discussion over and sent the group on to their next activity for the day.

That night, I couldn't sleep. Beth and I had not had the conversation Courtney was talking about, and I felt embarrassed by the wisdom of Courtney's words. More to the point, though, Courtney's statement made me realize that while I knew what I thought should happen if Beth got pregnant—given how young and unprepared for parenthood we were, it seemed to me self-evident that she ought to have an abortion—I'd never thought about the possibility that not only Beth's *idea* of what should happen, but also her *choice* in the event she were confronted with having to choose, might be very different.

So I asked, and the answer I got, that Beth didn't know what she thought, scared me, because if she didn't know what she would do—no, more than that, if she'd never even thought about what she would do, or if she had thought about it but was unwilling to tell me, then the meaning of the possible consequences of the sex we were having was completely beyond my control. Beth held in her hand, entirely out of my reach, the power to make a reality in my life, or not, the fatherhood that was by definition implicit for me each time I entered her body.

We were, of course, using birth control, and so it wasn't like we had to hold our breaths each time and hope that she wasn't pregnant, but birth control can fail and, besides, the more I thought about it and the more Beth resisted talking about it, the more I came to realize there was a principle involved: the meaning of sex in my life should not be defined by anyone's choices other than my own, and so, since there was no question in my mind that the decision about what to do if Beth became pregnant was ultimately and irrevocably hers, to continue having sex with her if she would not talk to me about what she thought pregnancy would mean to her was to fail in an obligation I owed to myself to be responsible and accountable for the sexual choices I made. I was not ready even

to think about being a father; Beth had the power to make me one whether I wanted it or not. I wanted to be able to choose when and whether to risk that she might, and I wanted to make that choice in the context of our choosing together what risks we were willing to take as a couple I *was* falling in love with her, as she had said she was with me, and it seemed to me foolhardy to risk that love and the emerging and still very fragile commitment we felt for each other on something as easily preventable as an unwanted pregnancy. For that, though, I needed her to talk to me.

It wasn't that I was trying to blackmail Beth into giving me an answer right there and then, though I recognize now she might have felt that way, but if she wasn't ready to have this discussion—and her resistance had made it clear to me that it was a discussion we *had* to have—then it seemed to me we ought to avoid all risk until she was ready, and that meant not having intercourse. I was willing to wait. All I wanted was a promise from her that she would think about it and that, when she was ready to talk, she would tell me. I would, I told her, accept whatever decision she came to—even if what she came to was that she had no idea what she would do if she got pregnant—and I understood entirely that she might change her mind were she actually to become pregnant, but it would be a shame for us to *have to* have this discussion after it was too late.

"What do you mean you're 'willing to accept' whatever decision I come to?" Beth wanted to know.

"I mean," I said, "that I will not try to change your mind."

"And sex?" she responded.

"Once you have some idea where you stand," I said, "then we can decide how much risk we're willing to take."

"We can decide?"

"Yes, we can decide," I said.

"And if I get pregnant?" the fear in her voice was palpable.

"If you get pregnant, that's something we'll have to deal with when it happens, but at least if we've talked about it beforehand, we'll be better prepared to figure things out together." This insight was new to me, though I didn't quite know how to articulate it at the time: that if we waited until she was pregnant to talk about this, the positions we would be talking from would more likely be ones focused on ourselves as individuals than on who we were as a couple.

"Look, Beth," I continued, "this is unknown territory for me too, and scary, and I don't know how to prove to you that I want to have this conversation because I want our

relationship to keep getting stronger, but that *is* why I want to have it. If you don't want to talk about it now, that's fine, but until we do talk, I want to stop having intercourse."

"Okay," she said, though I could tell she was not happy about it, "I'll tell you when I'm ready."

## SIXTEEN

I wasn't much of a dancer, but when Beth took my hand and started to move to the music Lionel Hampton's band was playing at Vassar College's Spring Semi-Formal—this was about a year before the conversation I just told you about—I started to move as well, and soon we were turning in not-quite-graceful imitation of a ballroom dance around the two or three square feet of floor we could claim as ours. When the music slowed, and the crowd thinned to those couples drawing each other close for the evening's first romantic dance, Beth leaned into me and whispered, "I like the way you move." I don't know why, but in her words I heard Bill voice telling me I had "a dancer's cheeks," and for a split second I was back in the catering hall and his hand was clamped between my legs and I was trying not to cry out as he pushed and lifted me from behind.

The moment passed, but I was no longer in the mood to dance, so I told Beth I wanted to sit down. The truth was that I felt a little out of place wearing only the plain blue suit that was the only suit I had. To the left of where we sat, a man in a tuxedo wearing Bugs Bunny slippers on his feet began to dance with a woman who'd accessorised her very formal white evening gown with a Miss Piggy nose and wig. Behind them, someone was dressed as the Mad Hatter from *Alice in Wonderland* and behind him was Gandalf the Wizard from Tolkien's *Lord Of The Rings*. I could tell because it said *Gandalf* on his staff.

While Beth saved a seat for me, I made my way to the bar to get us a couple of drinks. On my way back, someone walked very close behind me and put his or her hand on the small of my back to keep us from colliding. I turned quickly, expecting to find Bill's eyes staring straight into mine, but the person who'd touched me was already gone, and what I felt instead was that everyone was staring at me and that they all knew what was going on in my head. I decided then that I had to tell Beth what Bill and the old man in my building had done to me. I don't know why, but I felt like I had no choice but to tell her that night, as if the end of the dance were a point in time beyond which my story would no longer be valid. I handed Beth her drink, sat down facing her and took a deep breath. "I have to tell you something," I said.

"What?" The music was too loud; she hadn't heard me.

"There's something I need to talk to you about." A flute solo left room for me not to shout.

"Okay," she nodded her head, but her eyes were still on the dance floor and she was tapping her feet restlessly to the music.

"No, really, there's something about me that you need to know."

This got her attention. She turned to face me, leaned her elbow against the back of my chair, rested her chin in her hand, and waited.

"When I was a kid, I was mol—" At that moment, the entire horn section began to play, drowning out the rest of my sentence.

"When you were a kid what?" She had to raise her voice to make sure that I heard her, and I could see a hint of impatience on her face, as if she suspected that what I had to tell her could probably wait until the dance was over.

"When I was a kid, I was molested." We were nearly shouting and I was praying no one was paying attention.

"You were what?!"

"Molested. By a man who lived in my building."

"Uh-huh," her voice was the voice that people use when they don't know what to say and are waiting to hear more, but I didn't have it in me to tell anymore, and so I fell silent, and Beth went back to watching the dance floor and tapping her feet to the music. I felt tremendous relief. The words had come out of my mouth and the world had not fallen apart. My girlfriend hadn't called me a liar, or said that I'd deserved it, or walked out of the dance in disgust at who I was. In fact, when we finished this conversation the next day, she was warm and understanding, and angry for me, and filled with compassion and a tender protectiveness for which I am still grateful.

Beth and I met at the same summer camp where the leader of that training session had said he was only going to talk to us about girls who'd been abused sexually. At the time, she was seeing two other men: the one she thought she was going to marry and the one she was seeing to make sure that the one she was going to marry was really the one. We became friends leaning one night against the telephone pole outside the teen division's main office. If I remember correctly, we'd come out to watch a lunar eclipse. We talked for hours, though I could not tell you now a single thing we said to each other. I liked Beth immensely, but I had no desire to square the love triangle she was in, and neither did she, but the more we talked—and after that first night we talked as often as we could—it was hard to deny that we were attracted to each other. Then, one night, as

we were sitting together on the hill outside my tent, Beth climbed into my lap and put my arms around her. We sat like that for a long time without saying a word, and we sat like that on subsequent nights as well, and while it would be another year before we became lovers, and still another before she broke up with the guy she'd come to camp thinking she was going to marry, when we finally did become an "official" couple, we already knew each other very well as friends.

It was this friendship that I trusted when I told Beth about the men who'd sexually abused me, and it was this friendship I did not want to betray by continuing to have intercourse with her as if we already agreed on what the full significance of that act and its possible consequences meant between us, or as if those consequences did not exist. Or, which was to me at the time the strangest part of our conversation in Friendly's, as if the consequences were hers alone to worry about, not mine. "It's my body," Beth had told me. "Why can't you let me worry about it?" But it was my body also, and my future also, and the child that was at the heart of the original question I asked Beth would have been *ours*, and his or her future *ours* to worry about, *ours* to provide for, and because Beth and I were such good friends, I assumed that even if the abstinence I was insisting on made her uncomfortable, she too felt she could trust in and would her best to preserve the underlying bedrock of our friendship.

It would be easy at this point to lie and say that we did in fact abstain completely from intercourse until Beth said she was ready to talk, and it would be even easier to say that the times "we fell off the wagon" were initiated by Beth, because I remember clearly that one time was initiated by her—because I asked her about it and she told me she'd gotten "carried away"—but the fact is that I know we had intercourse more than once during this time, and not only do I not remember clearly who on those occasions initiated what; but even if Beth did initiate it, I could have and should have stopped her.

Looking back, of course, I see much more clearly than I could then just how profoundly complex my insistence on abstention was, me, the guy, the one who was supposed always to want sex. All I can say now is that I was in over my head and I didn't know it. I was, after all, only twenty one and not really equipped, emotionally or otherwise, to set and live by the limits I wanted to set. More to the point, I didn't know what it was I was over my head in.

## SEVENTEEN

I don't remember how long it was before Beth told me she'd decided she would have an abortion if she got pregnant, but once she did tell me and our lovemaking went back to the way it had been before, I experienced the sex we were having as much more meaningful for having been the result of a fully conscious and conscientious choice.

It was, apparently, a one-sided experience.

Years later, Beth told me she'd thought our conversation in Friendly's had really been about my wanting sex with no strings attached and that I'd been setting the stage to leave her if she didn't give me what I wanted. She didn't believe, however, that I was really "that kind of guy," so she pretended to take some time to think about the question of an unwanted pregnancy—she always knew, she said, that she'd never have an abortion—and then told me what she thought I wanted to hear, hoping time would prove her right about the kind of guy I was.

I still remember the conspiratorial smile on Beth's face when she drew close to me and almost whispered that while she'd had definite second thoughts after the two or three times we'd had intercourse when we were supposed to be abstaining—she'd decided to test me, she said, and I almost failed—I'd obviously turned out to be the "right" kind of guy, since otherwise she'd have already put an end to our relationship.

She was trying to say something that would make me happy, but I felt as if I'd been punched in the stomach, and the wind that was knocked out of me was everything I'd believed about who we were and what we'd meant to each other. I could not erase from my mind the image of this woman making love with me and thinking, each and every time, that I was using her. I could not fathom that she would have dared to let me into her body, allowing me to believe that she trusted me, when in fact she did not.

I don't remember what I said when Beth told me this, or if I said anything. What I do remember is how angry I was, and frustrated, because I didn't know precisely who or what to be angry at. I understood intuitively why Beth would have felt it necessary to test me the way she did, and I was enough in thrall to traditional sexual and gender

stereotypes that I couldn't see them as a large part of what I had to reason through to understand more fully what had happened.

*The fundamentally alien landscape that a woman's experience of sex is to me.*

I try to put myself in Beth's place, imagine that I'm a twenty-year-old woman from a fairly conservative Catholic background. I've just recently started having sex with a Jewish man, a year older than I am, whose background is at least as liberal as mine is not. He says he's falling in love with me, and I think I may be starting to feel the same way about him, or at least I see that I could love him if I wanted to make that happen. Yet here he is telling me he wants to stop having intercourse while we talk about what I think I would do if I become pregnant. He says right up front that he's not yet ready to be a father, so I know what *he* thinks I should do, and then in almost the same breath, he points out that we can still make love the way we did before. He'd been perfectly satisfied with that, he says, and he thought I was as well—which I was—so why not? He reassures me over and over again that he's not looking for a reason to break up with me. In fact, he wants me to believe our relationship will be stronger when we get through what he keeps referring to as "this process."

When I say it all back to myself like that, I can hear the mixed messages Beth must've been receiving, for I was violating some of the strongest stereotypes we have about heterosexual men, especially young heterosexual men, for whom sex, and specifically intercourse, is supposed to be literally irresistible. As with all stereotypes, this one contains an element of truth, but the irresistibility of sex for men, as any man who's being honest will tell you, is at least as much about status as it is about pleasure. For the sexual penetration of a woman is both a rite of passage into heterosexual manhood and a way of sustaining your manhood status over time. Within this logic, to choose not to penetrate a woman who is willing and even eager to be penetrated is to choose not to be a man.

Whether or not Beth thought this logic through consciously, I imagine it was part of what made it impossible for her to believe I was being honest. Perhaps even more disturbing for her, though, at least within the traditional way of thinking I'm talking about here, was the fact that what I was saying implicitly called into question her decision to let me penetrate her in the first place, and I have chosen my phrasing here very consciously. For within this tradition women are supposed to see sex exclusively in terms of love and marriage and children, or at least about love and *the potential* for marriage and children, which means that when a woman chooses to allow a man into her body—or, to put it another way, when she chooses *the* man to whom she will *give* her body—she has to be careful to choose someone who will respect what sex is supposed to be about for her. Otherwise, she risks becoming, in her own eyes if not the eyes of those who know her, a slut.

A slut is the antithesis of what a traditional "good woman" is supposed to be in much the same way that a man who chooses not to have intercourse with a willing woman is a kind of non-man. The metaphor of the gift is significant here. When Beth "gave herself

to me," she entrusted me not simply with what is commonly referred among twenty-year-olds as her "reputation," but also with her own internal sense of who she was as a result of that giving. When I told her I wanted to stop having intercourse with her, in other words, she probably could not help but hear me to be saying that her gift had been "devalued" in my eyes, even though that is not what I meant or what I said.

At twenty—and I'm projecting here, but if Beth was back then anything like many other twenty-year old women I've met over the years, I don't think I'm far off—the internal crisis this "devaluation" threw her into was probably far more real and more immediately frightening than the possibility and consequences of getting pregnant, which explains why preserving her sense of herself as a "good girl," a woman who was not a slut, took precedence over making absolutely sure we did not conceive a child she would've wanted to keep and I would've wanted to abort. As long as we kept having intercourse, no "devaluation" of her gift would have occurred.

In fact, of course, neither Beth nor I were as clear-eyed and calculating as I have made us sound here, and it's possible I have misrepresented Beth entirely—though I have not misrepresented, I don't think, the questions this story raises about the subversive potential of a man setting his own sexual boundaries, especially in relation to reproduction. Those questions, however, are a subject I will leave for another time because what I have just remembered is that Beth was the woman I told you about at the start of this essay, between whose legs I crouched while all the different words for vagina ran through my mind, and I did tell her that she was beautiful there, and she did ask me to fuck her, but there were no tears in her eyes, and what she told me was not that I was the first man who'd ever told her she was beautiful "down there"—though I think I may have been—but rather that she had learned to see herself that way because it was so clearly evident that I meant it when I said it.

The idea that someone could grow up not liking their genitals was new to me and Beth's revelation made me both happy and sad: happy that she was at last beginning to see in herself the beauty I saw in her and sad because it was clear that the pleasure and joy I'd found in our physical relationship had always been already compromised for her. I imagined her wondering as I touched and stroked and kissed her whether I really liked touching and stroking and kissing her *there*; and I think now of the daughter I do not have, whom I may never have, whose genitals are the title of this essay, of the women, like the women in my independent study, who have been in some sense my surrogate daughters, and I think about the almost unimaginably powerful forces arrayed against them, working to make sure they feel about their genitals precisely as Beth did when I met her; and then I think about the lovers this daughter I have imagined for myself will have—male or female, it doesn't matter—and what I hope is that they will, each and every one of them, see in her genitals the wild and beautiful cunt I saw when I crouched between Beth's legs and couldn't take my eyes off her.

These lovers will perhaps use a word other than *cunt*, and even more than I hope that they will see the beauty between her legs, what I hope is that it will not be from them that she first learns of that beauty, but rather that her own sense of herself as beautiful

will be a gift she gives to them. Today one of my independent study students shared a draft of an essay in which she talks about how masturbation was for her a form of rebellion against her tyrannical and sexually repressive father. As we discussed the piece, my other student, who is about ten years older than the writer, talked about how, when she started to masturbate, she'd thought she was the only one doing it. "I thought so too," was the writer's quiet, almost mumbled response, and then both women dissolved into a laughter of recognition and slightly embarrassed relief. I know I would not be a father whose daughter had to use self-pleasuring as a form of resistance, but I know as well how easy it would be to remain silent as a father on the question of my daughter's pleasure and how deeply this silence would be implicated in the larger cultural silence that makes the title of this essay, "My Daughter's Vagina," so shocking and transgressive. What I do *not* know, for this daughter I have imagined is not and may be my child, never exist, is how I would make breaking that silence part of the reason for the day-to-day living that is family life.

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