

Near-sex Experiences (Confessions of a Mormon Girl)

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I DON'T UNDERSTAND SEX. I know how it's done, more or less—you don't have three kids without learning something. I mean I don't understand the big picture. Sex gets more confusing the more I know.

I thought I was learning something in high school, for example. My friend Shellie seemed like an authority. It's not that I didn't know the basics. My mom's a nurse. She sat me down, with my sister, when we were ten and eleven, after we'd asked her what "fuck" meant. We'd seen it scratched on the wall of the elementary school bathroom. She explained it all, complete with diagrams of the uterus and penis, with little long-tailed sperm swimming toward the egg. I wish I would have saved that picture. Mom didn't draw very often.

Mom made it clear that sex was for marriage. "You don't give the most precious thing you own away to just anybody," she said. "Besides, there are some things you only want someone you really trust to know about you."

I thought she meant that I would want no one but my husband to ever know I would actually take my clothes off in front of a man.

But my new friend Shellie was the first person I knew who suggested that there might be more to it than the clinicals. She claimed that there was a lot to sex between a kiss and an entry that I had yet to dream of. She said her brother had gotten two girls pregnant. I'm not certain now why that assured me she knew so much. She'd moved from Salt Lake City with her parents, who thought that bringing her to a small town with only Mormons would diminish her opportunities to try sex and drugs. It did for a while.

Not like sex didn't exist in the Valley, of course—plenty of evidence that it did. Anyway, Shellie and I got in the habit of sluffing seminary, since it didn't count toward graduation, and going to her boyfriend's house for the hour. Sometimes longer. Gordon lived near the high school.

He'd dropped out a long time ago and was hanging out at his dad's house until he could get established as a rock star. We didn't do much, just watched T.V. and made macaroni and cheese. Sometimes Shellie and Gordon made out on the couch during commercials. Sometimes they disappeared in the back room and I didn't hear much. I wished I had a boyfriend, mostly so I could tell Shellie to shut up once in a while and quit thinking she was the only one who knew anything about male anatomy. But I was forced to trust her.

My first good opportunity was nowhere near real sex, as Shellie later informed me. I was sixteen and more interested in skiing than other physical pleasures. At least that's what I told myself. I had earned a day off school through a good report card. Dad said he'd come with me if I'd wait a day, but the powder was new and deep and I liked skiing alone. I really did. So I drove my mother's car to Snowbird and caught the first chair up. Four and a half hours later, I called "single" on Wilbere (what was I doing clear down there? I must have hit the lodge for a candy bar) and a masculine voice responded behind me.

He was an older man; he said he was twenty-two. He smiled warmly at what must have looked like an easy one-afternooner. That year I was trying hard to look rough and experienced, the way I imagined some of my friends to be, but I'm certain the results were nominal. I probably looked exactly like what I was: a chubby naive kid without the experience to say "no."

But maybe I'm giving him too much credit. He was from Connecticut, on a ski vacation with his roommates. Maybe I looked good compared to the girls in Connecticut. Maybe sixteen-year-old Connecticut girls really did hit the sack with men they had known an hour or less. How was I supposed to know? I still don't. I only know what happened that day in Utah: halfway up the lift he suggested we ski together for the afternoon. I thought I was dreaming. He was beautiful—in fact, I remember him looking a lot like my husband does now—slightly built, tapering the way men ought to, rosy cheeks in the chilly air, curly brown hair. Shellie would never believe me. I guess he told me his name, but I have no memory of it.

Although his skiing was only competent, I couldn't see how he'd become so tired after only one run. On the chair again he suggested we find a place to sit and rest. He found one like it was waiting for us, a tiny clearing on a knoll overlooking a busy run. When he took off his skis, I suggested that I take another run while he rested. We could meet in half an hour.

"Oh, no, stay," he coaxed. "The sun feels good. Can't you relax a minute?"

I sat, lifting my skis and dropping them, feet still in, like stakes into

the lightly packed snow. He was wearing waterproof overalls, the slick noisy 1970s kind, but I knew my jeans would begin sucking water any second. He noticed, too, and gallantly took off his coat, laid it flat on the snow beside him, and patted it in invitation.

I can't overemphasize the depth of my ignorance here. I had seen plenty of movies, read a few books on romance—but I didn't believe them. I was certain of nothing, not even that he might want more from me than a breather between ski runs.

He smiled and patted his coat again. I inched toward it.

"Why don't you take off your skis?" he suggested.

"Oh. Yeah," I replied. I took off my gloves, reached toward my feet with some difficulty, snapped out of the bindings, but didn't undo the safety straps. I dragged the skis along as I slid onto his coat. He welcomed me with an unmitten hand on my shoulder.

Did we talk? If we did, it wasn't long, and it was as his fingers were already massaging their way across the back of my neck and down the other arm. That's why I don't recall the conversation. "Kind of stiff, aren't you?" he asked.

"Uh, no, not really. I ski a lot."

His lips touched the back of my neck. My hair stood straight up. He licked his way around to my farther ear. I stared straight ahead.

He whispered, "Would you feel more comfortable in the condominium? I'll bet it's nice and warm in there."

I could hardly hear him. My Sunday school teacher was screaming too loudly in my other ear: "BOYS AND GIRLS! SEX OUTSIDE THE HOLY BONDS OF MARRIAGE IS THE SIN NEXT TO MURDER! GOD WILL NOT FORGIVE THE FORNICATOR!"

"I'd love to make love to you," said the boy from Connecticut.

I stood up, dragged my skis by the straps on my boots to a flat spot, and snapped them on my feet.

"I have to go," I announced. I made record time down Big Emma, skated to the car, fumbled for the keys, and wet my pants in the driver's seat. The next day I told Shellie everything but the final detail. She laughed until she couldn't breathe.

I promised myself that next time I'd learn more.

I left high school for college half a year early. I spent the semester after Christmas with my older sister at a strict Mormon college in Idaho. Men were rare and only the most socially beautiful girls dated them. I returned home that summer for a few weeks before transferring to Utah State University.

In the interim Dad and I stopped for gas one night at the local 7-Eleven. Someone behind me said, "Karin! You back in town?"

It was my friend Wade Fraley, better known as "Shady," grown a foot

in only six months. That was the only difference, though. He still had dirty red hair and lots of freckles. It didn't appear he'd gained any weight as his height had increased. He was bony and pale, the way chronic pot smokers tend to be. He offered to take me home. I left him in the dark parking lot, notified my father that a guy I knew was taking me home, and climbed into Shady's dented green pickup.

We took the long way home, then bypassed my parents' house and drove up the old Power Plant road. The moon was almost full.

"What's that?" Shady asked, pointing to a low tower a quarter of a mile ahead.

"Rodeo grounds," I answered. "That's the announcer's box."

Shady drove to its base. The white sand of the arena glowed in the moonlight, and the supporting bars of the tower made geometric shadows inside the car. Shady turned the ignition off and we sat uneasy.

"So, how is everybody?" I asked.

"Fine," he replied.

"Trent? Did he graduate?"

"No. That jerk Allred wouldn't pass him, so he dropped out at Christmas."

"So what's he doing?"

"Working at the Steel Plant. My uncle got him a job down there."

"How about Bob?"

"His dad kicked him out of the house," Shady explained, absorbed in packing a pipe.

"He's thinking of joining the army," he said when it occurred to him.

"The ARMY?" I asked. "He'd never cut his hair! And his lungs would explode in basic training."

"Yeah. That's pretty much what he's thinking."

Shady lit the pipe and took a grateful toke. He offered it to me. "You still straight?" he asked.

I looked out the window, then rolled it down.

"Hate to waste this hit," he murmured, drawing it back. We sat a while, Shady enjoying the smoke, me pondering the moonlight.

I don't remember how he made the transition from smoking to kissing. I was surprised. I'd never seen him interested in much beyond drugs. He smelled and tasted like smoke. I choked a minute, but I remembered Shellie's laughter, her assurance that I could go a long way beyond a kiss without technically losing my virtue. I drew a fresh breath from the open window and turned my face back.

He was aggressive and awkward, hands everywhere but nowhere in particular, sometimes just in the way of getting closer to me.

"It's hot in here," he said. "Let's go up in that tower."

We went up. Before I could catch my breath, we were at it again. The

hard wooden platform ground against my shoulder blades. I had hoped making out would be more ethereal.

"You got nice tits," Shady said, reaching inside my shirt. I pushed his hand away. He kissed me more, holding the back of my neck so hard I realized he could break it.

"Shady," I said, when he took a breath. He didn't hear me.

"Shady, we've go to stop."

He reached into my shirt again. I tried to push him away, but he pressed harder.

"Just let me take a look," he said. "That's all I want."

He undid the top two buttons. I pulled away, remembering my mother's warning that once you reached a certain point, there was no turning back on sex. I didn't know what that point was, but I guessed it might peak soon after the buttons were undone.

"No," I said, but not well. I guessed he hadn't heard, since he continued with the third and fourth buttons. I struggled and pulled away, sitting up straight.

He looked surprised.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

I stared at him.

"Nothing. That's enough! We've got to stop."

He looked bewildered.

"Let's go back to the car," I suggested.

He brightened. "Okay," he said and assisted me down the ladder. He even opened the car door for me. Then he climbed in on my side and pulled me onto his lap. He tore the last two buttons off.

"Oh, sorry," he said.

"No!" I said, better this time. I reached for the door handle. He grabbed my wrist and pushed my hand hard against his fly.

"What do you think of *this*?" he asked, grinning.

He seemed to think I had something to compare it to. I didn't. It threw me for a minute; I lost my train of thought. I wasn't certain that anything was what I thought it was.

He took my astonishment for admiration and went for his belt buckle to show me more.

"No! No!" I said. "You've got to take me home!"

"What the hell you talking about?"

"Home! I need to go home!" I opened the door and spilled out.

Shady got out, too, staring in disbelief.

"Fuck!" he said, after a moment. "Fuu-uuck! What's wrong with you?"

I didn't entirely understand his question. He stepped closer. I backed away.

He grabbed my wrist again and pulled me to him.

"What's wrong with you?" he repeated.

I wasn't sure.

"I don't want to do it." I said. "I want you to take me home."

He squeezed my wrist harder.

"Damn!" he said, wide-eyed. He didn't let go.

I pulled back as far as my arm would let me. He jerked me to him and pushed hard against me.

"I could rape you, you know."

"I know."

"It'd be your own fault. You got me this far. You shouldn't promise me something then not do it."

"I didn't promise you anything."

"It was like you did. You were doing as much as I was."

I had nothing to say. I was raised in a world that made it clear that women were responsible for male sexual behavior. I still believed it—all of it—then.

"I could just make you do it," Shady warned. Or maybe he was just asking.

"Please don't. Please. I'm sorry."

"You fucking bitch!"

On this side of an English degree I wonder now why the standard response to a girl who said "no" was to call her a fucking bitch. According to my mother's definition, anyway, that was one adjective that didn't apply.

But I didn't ponder it then. I just said, "Please take me home, Wade. Please."

He dropped my arm. I almost fell backward.

"Why should I?" he glowered.

"Because. You're my friend."

He stared at me, uncertain, then stalked around the car and got in the driver's seat. For a moment I thought I was going to have a long walk home, but he pushed my door open and sat sullenly. I might have been smarter to walk, but I got in.

He drove me home. I got out and leaned back in to thank him.

"Fuck," he said, but mildly. He had already lit up another joint. I ran in the house. I heard his car running for several minutes in the driveway. He'd probably forgotten where he was. I heard him pull out suddenly, his tires squealing a little as he turned.

I hung my clothes out the window so in the morning my parents wouldn't worry that I'd been smoking marijuana.

I started at Utah State, two hours north of my hometown, just a few weeks later. My roommates that year were a peculiarly unpleasant coal-

tion, mostly Mormon girls not too far from home. Two of them were engaged to men so repulsive that I seriously pondered eternal celibacy rather than marry in my faith as my parents wished.

But when Janet moved out at the Christmas break to get married, Kami moved in. Her friend Teresa lived in another apartment, but she spent her spare time in ours. I thought Kami was silly and believed the peroxide in Teresa's hair had affected her intelligence. But they changed the atmosphere of the apartment. They were friendly when I chanced home from my favorite hiding place in the library, teasing me about my books, making stuffy faces at the titles. They made me laugh, made me sociable in ways I had never been. I was surprised and happy when they invited me to share an apartment with them and some other friends when we returned in the fall.

Oddly, the roommate I became closest to was Teresa, who was smarter than she looked—shrewder than any of us in bargaining with the functional world. But she did not often let on to that when men were around, which was smart, too, if dating was the goal; she attracted them like no one I had ever met. She was generous and inviting but never cheap. She loved a boy from home named Tommy, who had disapproved of her choice to come to college. She was determined to let him get used to it. But she wouldn't give up college, and she wouldn't play the nun.

In the meantime I fell in love with a flower boy from Sacramento, the kind of guy who made no sense at all to my roommates. He played Chopin in the practice rooms in the humanities building, wore Birkenstocks before anyone from Utah knew what they were, and once made whole wheat bread and broccoli quiche for me and all my roommates. We practiced the venerable Mormon art of late-night imprecision. I learned a lot.

But he broke my heart, and that same cold winter Teresa's stormy romance with Tommy was at its worst. When I went home for Christmas, my parents were planning a trip to Hawaii and jokingly asked if I wanted to come along. I took them up on it. Teresa and I made arrangements for a week-long absence from January classes, left Logan at fifteen degrees below zero, and flew to Hawaii with my folks. They didn't supervise us, and we left them alone, meeting them to eat or to visit Pearl Harbor, teasing them if they came back to the hotel later than we did.

One night Teresa and I left Mom and Dad reliving glory days on the beach and went to a discotheque we had spotted earlier, three blocks from the hotel. I wore my blue sleeveless dress and high heels. I applied more hairspray than I ever had in my life, and Teresa lavished my face with makeup. We danced that night with so many Japanese tourists and posed for so many photographs that even Teresa tired of pretending she was a movie star. On the second block toward our hotel we saw two

young American men approaching us. One was tanned and muscular in the neon light. He had light brown hair and a mustache over white teeth. The other was a leering geek. I knew which one I was going to take a walk with.

"What are you ladies doing out so late?" the suave one smiled. Teresa beamed. I gazed down the street, mapping an escape and avoiding eye contact at the same time. The chat continued. I acknowledged my name when Teresa mentioned it. I've forgotten both their names by now. Dick and Harry?

"You're majoring in English?" one of them said to me. I brought my attention back. It was the cute one. Dick. I raised my eyebrows.

"Teresa says you're majoring in English," he repeated.

"Uh, yeah," I said.

"You don't say much for an English major."

"Wait till she gets going," Teresa encouraged him.

Dick flashed his white teeth. "I'm in journalism," he said.

In spite of my poor opinion of college journalists, I was willing to consider an exception. He wasn't even looking at Teresa. Teresa was gazing down the street. Harry was grinning at Teresa. Dick slid his arm around my waist.

I looked back at my best friend. Why did I feel guilty? She'd been in my position a thousand times, and she'd always taken her chance. She blinked at me blandly and grinned. I knew she could handle the geek. I turned back and let Dick guide me down the sidewalk. Teresa and Harry followed a few yards behind.

"She's cute," Dick said. "But it's easy to tell who's really deep."

Since I still believed that "cute" and "deep" were mutually exclusive ratings, I surmised we were moving toward the beach to talk Shakespeare. We took off our shoes as we reached the sand. It was cool and smooth on our feet. The waves were high and the moon was low. Literary criticism notwithstanding, Dick was interested in other skills I'd picked up in college.

We worked our way to the edge of the pier. I kept telling myself that this was real romance. It looked and sounded just like the movies, and by now I was trying to believe them. His hands were strong and purposeful. While trying not to act like a naive kid from Utah, I imagined us spending my last two days in Hawaii together, writing letters for a few months, then marrying on the Pali when we were reunited. My parents would be concerned that he wasn't Mormon, but he was nice and going to college, so they'd get used to it.

Dick's hand at the top of my thigh jolted me back. I *was* a naive kid from Utah; I recoiled on instinct. He drew back, eyebrows raised.

"What's the matter?" he asked, wide-eyed.

Was I really so unique? Was his confusion genuine, or a ruse to convince me that I was the only one who had ever refused him? Did he say this to other women who wanted to stop? Or didn't other women want to stop? I still don't know.

Nor did I know how to answer him. Teresa saved me, sort of.

"Karin!" she was shouting, a hundred feet down the beach.

Dick and I both answered. "What?"

"I'm engaged, *aren't I?*" she called.

She wasn't, but she wore a ring Tommy had given her at high school graduation that she slipped on her wedding finger when she needed an excuse. I wished I had such an easy explanation. But I hadn't needed one as often as she had.

"Yes!" I shouted back.

There was a pause.

"What's his name?" Teresa hollered.

"Tommy Laird!" I responded correctly.

We didn't hear anything else. Dick laughed.

"Poor sucker," he said, apparently in reference to Harry. "He never scores."

"Karin!" Teresa called again.

"What?"

"I'm going back to the hotel!"

I jumped at my chance. "I've got to go. I'd better go back with her."

"What the hell you talking about?" Dick said. "She knows the way. Harry will walk her there."

"No, really. I'd better go."

"Come on!"

"Teresa!" I yelled. Dick grabbed my shoulders and kissed me hard. I pulled away. I got a good look at the dark water below us before he gripped my arms and kissed me again. I panicked.

"Teresa, wait—!"

He cut me off. "Okay, okay," he conceded. "It's all right. I'll walk you home."

He turned his face and shouted into the dark. "Go ahead! I'll take her home!" We watched their dark figures move up the beach.

Dick turned his attention back to me.

"What's the matter?" he asked again.

"Nothing!" I defended myself. "Nothing. I just need to go back to the hotel. My parents will be wondering where I am."

He looked at me as if he hadn't heard correctly. "Your *what?*"

"My mom and dad. Back at the hotel. They'll be wondering . . ."

"Your *mom and dad?*"

"I . . . yeah."

He started to laugh. He seemed genuinely speechless.

"That's crazy," he finally said. "That's the craziest line I ever heard."

"They'll be worried," I explained.

His eyebrows rose again suddenly. "How old are you?" he asked, alarmed.

"Nineteen."

He looked relieved, then confused again.

"So what do you care? You tell mommy and daddy every time you sleep with a guy?"

"What?"

"They keep track every time you—"

"Every time I *what*?"

We stared at each other.

"What—" he sputtered, "you trying to make me think you've never been laid before?"

We stared at each other.

"My God," he said. "I've heard lots of stupid lines from women. But this beats them all. My mom and dad are at the hotel. I'm a damn virgin ..."

He glared, maybe waiting for me to recant.

"God," he repeated.

"Well, I *am* a virgin."

"Yeah, right. I could tell while we were making out. You gonna tell me you've never kissed a guy, too?"

"No. I mean yes. Of course, I have."

This kind of conversation was hard for me to measure. I still didn't know how close—or how far away—kissing was to the real thing. Had I been closer to it than I'd imagined? I hoped not—not particularly at that point because I coveted virtue, but because I had imagined sex to be rather more spectacular.

"I really have to go home," I repeated.

"Home?" Dick glowered. "Home to Utah, you mean?"

"No! I mean the hotel!"

"Where is it? Which one?"

I looked north and west up the beach. I couldn't see it, but I could see the Hyatt Regency in the distance, only half a block below the cheaper hotel where we stayed.

"Hyatt," I said, to save explanations. I figured I could manage the last half block by myself.

He studied it for a moment.

"Have a good walk," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"I'm staying right up there," he said, pointing to a condominium two

hundred yards away. "You want to walk with me to my room, or do you want to see how safe it is to walk all the way back to mommy and daddy by yourself?"

I looked at my watch. It was exactly 3:00 a.m. I looked toward the Hyatt. It didn't look so far. Five blocks. I knew what would happen if I went with Dick. I could only guess what would happen if I didn't, but my limited imagination made the decision easier.

I told him I'd take the walk. He was astounded.

"You are one crazy fucking bitch." He stared for another minute, then looked like he'd had a revelation: "What, you some kind of dyke?"

I didn't know what that meant. He turned and walked away. My imagination is more vivid now; I'm actually amazed and grateful he had the restraint to leave me unharmed on the beach. That damn "Thank-You" again.

I didn't wait to see if he went to the condominium he'd pointed out. I picked up my shoes and sprinted for the lights on the beachfront. The sand held me back like a bad dream. I thought I'd never reach the streets, but I slowed, breathing hard, once I did. I panicked for a moment until I got my bearings, reconnoitered, and shifted into speedwalk, still in my stockings. Turning north, I made it halfway up the block before I heard a car slow and pull over behind me.

It followed me a few yards, at my pace. Maybe it was Dick, sorry he'd made me walk alone. But I didn't dare look.

"Hey, baby."

Four men were in a dimly lit mustang. The one closest to me had rolled down his window halfway.

"How much?" he inquired.

I paused, trying to process his question.

He waved his wallet. "How about a group discount?"

"Wha . . . ?" Pretty articulate, even for an English major.

We stared at each other, mutually bewildered, then a voice in the car said, "Go on a ways—" and the car squealed on up the street. I turned left at the corner, picking up speed. I could see the Hyatt ahead of me. It was further than I had anticipated, but it was a beeline. I realized what the men in the mustang had mistaken me for just as a female voice shrieked from the lightpost. I looked up and over. She was coming toward me fast.

I was already scared, but her long dark fingernails were the first thing I had instinctively comprehended that whole night. My heart somersaulted.

"Get off my corner!" she snarled. I turned around to run, but another woman was coming up from behind. I stopped dead, then turned back toward the Hyatt. The first woman stopped just a few feet short. All I clearly remember of her was her spike heels and fingernails, and that she

was head and shoulders taller than I was. She hissed like a cat.

"Oh, no. No," I explained, stepping sideways and plowing past. "I'm just going home. I'm just—"

I didn't make out what she said. I started to run again, pondering the encounter as I gasped for breath. Was she what I thought she was? Weren't they on Hotel Street? Could someone actually take me for one of them?

The last threads of my stockings snapped under my feet as I sailed across the street. I had just reached the curb when the next woman appeared like a beautiful sorceress under the streetlight. She was tall, like the other ones, with fingernails too. I excused myself before she had time to threaten me.

"Just going home!" I shouted, flying by. "I'm not doing a thing but going home right *now!*"

She cursed my back but held her corner. I calculated eight more encounters as I tallied the blocks to my hotel. I was right; there was one on every corner. Once I tried to slow down, hoping I could catch my breath as I eased past, but that one showed me a switchblade, and I decided my lungs were okay.

I rounded the courtyard of my hotel with the last air I had, suddenly realizing that Teresa had the lobby key. I prayed out loud, still running, that she'd remembered to wait, without believing God would be so gracious after such a night. But Saint Teresa was there, waiting by the door. She opened it just as my fingers touched the glass, and I nearly rolled across the carpet before coming to a stop.

"Oh my gosh, did you see them?" I heaved. "Thank you! Thanks for waiting! I thought they were going to kill me!"

"What?" she asked, still laughing at my entry. "Who was going to kill you?" Harry had walked her home, the same route I had taken. They had seen no one.

I couldn't retrieve my breath. I started toward the elevator. She followed, and I checked my heaves as we stole into the suite. Of course, Mom heard the door click. She came out of the back room in her night gown, widening her eyes when she saw mine.

"Come here," I whispered. We stepped out onto the balcony. A dark Waikiki stretched out below us. Beneath each streetlight lurked exactly one woman. A Monte Carlo pulled over to negotiate. We could not make out the exchange, but we heard sudden masculine laughter before the car squealed away. The woman turned her back.

We watched silently. Mom had spent a year in Hawaii back in the 1950s, single and beautiful, working as a nurse at a small Japanese hospital to pay for her adventure away from southeastern Idaho. I think now she'd seen more of the world than I gave her credit for. Teresa had grown

up in a rough mining town, isolated geographically but with a less obstructed view of poverty, desperation, and sexual complexities than the safe place I'd been raised. But that night we all watched, Mom and Teresa as shocked as I was. None of us, I believe, had ever understood our kinship with the women on the street.

Dad woke up and joined us on the balcony. He looked for a minute, then chuckled in recognition.

"I'll be damned," he grinned. "Hookers."

The year Mom worked in Hawaii, Dad had been in the Air Force, stationed in Japan. They were practically engaged; they rendezvoused whenever Dad flew in for island duties.

"Hookers never change," Dad said. "They look exactly like they used to."

We all watched a little longer, then my mother locked the door and we went to bed.

I was twenty-five when I married. By Utah standards, that's late. It's not that I hadn't gotten offers. While I was a Mormon missionary in rural Georgia, a traveling Holiness preacher had invited me to dedicate my life to him and God, traveling the revival circuit with him (the preacher, that is) in a camper truck. A year before I married Mark, I had been briefly engaged to a BYU campus man who asked me if I'd been sexually molested as a child when he realized I planned to wait until after the marriage to consummate it. Once I went skydiving with my longtime friend Richard, which had, I still believe, the same binding quality as sex at its best: apprehension and risk, letting go, a few breathless moments out of place and time, perfect eye contact across the distance that divides us, return to earth. I pretty much assumed we were married after our second jump. But on the ground our differences were too painful. He stays in my mind the same way a former lover would.

I received plenty of advice on sex from friends who had married before I did. A former roommate, married six months before I was, revealed to me that sex was overrated, that they rarely took the trouble anymore, except that they wanted a baby. Another friend told me that she wouldn't care if her husband had an affair; he wanted sex so much more often than she did that it would be nice to have another woman to absorb the extra energy. "That's why polygamy worked," she said. "Three women to every man. Or more. That way, at least they'd get a few nights to themselves."

There have been times since I married that I have agreed with them. After the first two nights of our honeymoon I wondered what the fuss was about. I had waited twenty-five years for a twenty-minute lesson in physiology? An exaggerated kiss?

After the first year I was so dissatisfied that I was willing to stop trying; my husband was dissatisfied to the point of insatiability. And we still didn't realize how little we knew about sex. We weren't even close. The years of holding back had inhibited me in ways I couldn't even recognize, let alone undo in a year. Mark's virgin years had left him with fantastic expectations that I simply couldn't fulfill.

I'm sure there are gender characteristics involved here, but a lot of it must be rooted as well in mere personality differences, in different family patterns. Take Christmas, for example. Mark's family and mine are both within easy driving distance, so we juggle the Christmas ceremonies. If you can call my family's Christmas morning a ceremony. We drop by with our kids about eight o'clock. My sister brings hers if she isn't working. They awaken my younger siblings, all grown up but not necessarily adults. They get dressed, Dad lights a fire downstairs, we march down, pass around the gifts, open them all at the same time, thank each other for the small appliances and cases of chicken noodle soup, and play with the kids' new toys until breakfast. Mom makes Swedish pancakes, not necessarily because we're Swedish, and then everyone goes skiing. Except Mom, who waves them off, shoos Mark and me and the kids toward the Valley, finds a book and enjoys her one day of genuine solitude of the year. One hour flat, start to finish.

Thirty minutes later we arrive at Mark's parents', where his five sisters have been cursing us for the delay. Our children are rushed to their places in line behind the kitchen door, marched in with their cousins to a room which now looks like Santa's workshop, and the orgy begins. First the stockings. Then Santa herself, Mark's sister Jennifer in white beard and red long johns, distributing the first gifts of Christmas. Then the other gifts, first the children's, piled high before their wild eyes, opened one at a time as the whole family looks on. Then the adults', one by one as the children orbit: handmade books and dolls, souvenirs from farflung travels, trinkets and boxes, each with a preamble and each wrapped so elaborately I feel guilty disturbing them. Somewhere near two in the afternoon, at the point I'm hyperventilating, Mark's father announces the string gift. Twenty or twenty-five of us follow a mile or more of red string through the house and yard and back to the big gift of the year, an antique desk for the upstairs study, maybe, or hand-sewn ballet dresses for all the little girls. And we haven't even started dinner.

And that's just Christmas. What made us imagine that sex would come easy?

Five years into marriage I am just beginning to understand how much baggage we bring, virgin or not, into a long-term sexual relationship. I thought I was coming to marriage with a fairly light load, but an honest inventory suggests otherwise. I will probably never understand

the full weight I drag. So maybe I didn't inherit an enormous sex-guilt connection from my parents. I did take on their attitude that making a bigger deal of anything than absolutely necessary is despicable. Besides skiing, despising the fanatical is my family's one fanaticism. That's a big trunk, heavy enough to pull around on wheels, and there's plenty of sexual paraphernalia locked, maybe irretrievably, inside.

I picked up plenty of carry-ons from growing up in a small, strictly Mormon community. We're not all as crazy as old Jacob Guttman, but his kind does tend to trail us around. I remember Jacob standing up in church and pounding his fist on the pulpit: "The woman is long in the hair and short in the brains! The man is to guide and control the woman! Do not fall for the temptations of the woman! And children! Santa Claus is a dirty lie!"

When I was just old enough to comprehend her story, I recall Jacob's wife Clara telling us in testimony meeting, in an accent as thick as her husband's although she had been born and raised in Alpine like my grandma, about a fateful night in their family history. She had dreamed of a beautiful baby boy (they had six daughters and only two sons) who had spoken to her, even though he was only an infant. He told her to wake his daddy up quick because he was chosen to come to their family. This was serious business with a couple who never wallowed in filthy intercourse unless they were fairly certain it would result in offspring, lust's sole justification. Trembling, Clara woke her husband, who, surprised into action, lost control too soon.

"And he spilled the seed on the sheets!" Clara wailed. "It was all spilled! And we lost the beautiful baby boy!"

Jacob sat upright, pale and chastened. I personally was relieved, unwilling to welcome another Guttman boy to the neighborhood, mean as his brothers were. My sister and I later wondered together how much "seed" had been spilled on the sheets after such a long wait. Their youngest child was eight.

I carry mace in my baggage, although I can never find it when I need it, to ward off potential sex fiends. I learned young that you never know who will turn out to be one. Like LaMar Warnock, a frail quiet guy, the last you'd ever suspect. But in Alpine we know better, because my uncle and his pals when they were thirteen were wandering through LaMar's apple orchard with nothing to do but break the padlock on his shed. They discovered a trove of *Playboy* magazines, so many they didn't guess he'd miss a few. They each took some home, traded them back and forth until somebody's parents found out. Boy, was LaMar in trouble. He had to see the bishop, who made him go to each kid and his parents and apologize. No wonder I don't trust men. No wonder I don't even know who not to trust.

I even carry saddlebags. When I was fourteen, I rode with my dad in the pickup to take our mare to be bred. We eased her backward out of the trailer, I led her to an empty stall, then I followed my father and Bill Milden through the stables to see the high-blue-eyed stallion they had chosen to sire the colt. He reared and whinnied at our approach, so hot and wild he seemed to be throwing off sparks. He made my pulse leap, my legs weak. I wanted to stay and watch, but Milden said, "I don't think that's the kind of thing a young lady would really want to see." I felt the blood rush to my face. I'd seen horses do it before; the big mare and the skinny no-breed stallion in the pasture by the elementary school were always at it, at least half-heartedly. He'd mount and she'd kick him away. He'd come back with hoof scrapes on his bony shoulders, begging for more. By then Sister Higbey would be out of her house with a broom, shaking it at us to get on home before she called our mamas. We'd scatter and watch sideways as we walked along the fence.

Dad and I left the mare at Milden's and went home, planning to retrieve her in a week. That next Tuesday night at the weekly church youth meeting the boys my age seemed particularly interested in addressing me. Turned out that Bill Milden had invited the scout troop out for an educational activity.

"We watched your horse get pregnant," John Jensen grinned. Kent Jolley snickered behind him.

"You shoulda seen him go after her!" Kent exploded. "Geez, I thought he was gonna . . ."

"Shut up, jerkface!" John gave him a slug. Kent's freckled face turned red and he staggered away, laughing too hard to catch his breath. I saw him again later, with Brett and Jason, whispering and gesturing at the end of the hall. They stopped when they saw me, guffawed and disappeared around the corner.

"Goll," said my friend Laurie, smoothing her hair. "What's with them?"

I told her I didn't know. Maybe I didn't. I was in school the day Dad brought the mare back to the pasture behind my Grandma's house. I walked through the apple orchard to give her oats and brush her down. She nickered and nuzzled as she always did, apparently unaltered. But I caressed her more gently than usual, then sat on the stile and cried for no reason.

So what does all this amount to? I am not certain. As I said, I don't understand sex. But at least I understand *that* much. It took a while just to recognize my ignorance. It took even longer to recognize my long-suppressed fear and anger. Never again will I thank a man for not hurting me, as if we were somehow naturally to expect the opposite. I understand that revealing some kinds of emotions to my husband is far more

difficult, and far more intimate, than revealing my body.

I read reports on sexuality, I ponder national statistics on the subject, I try to assess what I really know about sexual behavior in the society I know best—Mormon Utah, where nobody's story is straight. I wonder how much like and unlike the "real world," where nobody's story is straight, we are.

Realizing that nobody's story is straight threw me for a while, but currently I'm finding the whole phenomenon of nonstop dishonesty almost liberating. Trusting no one allows me more room to trust myself. It also frees me, as the years expand into a lifetime of interaction, connection, disruption, reassessment, sexual and otherwise, to increasingly trust the partner I have committed to. Maybe that's the trust my mother was referring to, although I doubt she could articulate it further than she did when I was twelve.

But I don't entirely trust my mother anymore, either, at least not to define my marriage. The problem is, I grew up with parents who made so much sense, who were right about so many things without being coercive, that I still have a hard time questioning their wisdom. Mom's last bit of advice, and her worst, dispensed the night before my marriage in the Salt Lake temple, was "Never tell your husband 'no' when he wants sex. You're asking for trouble. A man's drive is too strong. If you refuse, he'll go to someone who will say 'yes.'" That had been the advice her bishop, now a prominent general authority, had given her just before her marriage to my father.

I spent the first four years of marriage, I believe, unconsciously hating my husband and men in general (women, too, come to think of it) for holding me hostage in the name of the mythic male libido. Were these the terms of fidelity? Of trust and mutuality? My mother wasn't the only one who conveyed the message. The consequences of saying "no" to a man, apparently, even once, ranged from rape threats to abandonment on the beach to betrayal of the most sacred mutual commitment I had been raised to respect. Marriage as I perceived it was prostitution no less than walking the streets of Waikiki.

Not that prostitution doesn't have its own power. A whore can pretend to say no, drag it out to get a higher price, make him suffer, humiliate him as much as she's been humiliated herself. She can turn his power tactics upside down and make him hold out on his own premises for eight years, then tell the world he lost it on the sheets. She can say no forever and drive him out to the tool shed with his shame and his magazines, my mother would certainly observe.

But I don't want that kind of power. And I don't want to say no forever. I don't want games or politics or mere unburdened copulation. I want consensus. I want marriage. I want sex, ongoing and better all the

time. My mother was right on that one; partnership and sex are a lifetime project.

So Mark and me, we're practicing for the big orgasm. We've had some promising previews: once, not even touching each other, sharing a *café religieuse* on a bench on a walking bridge spanning the Seine. Once in wordless mutual solace in the darkest, bleakest place we've ever been together. Once in a wide open meadow below sheer granite in the heart of the Lone Peak Wilderness . . .

Yes.

Some year, way down the future, we might just manage the most spectacular climax a man and a woman are capable of achieving together. Maybe more than once. Body and soul, mind and heart, sex and life. Chance and circumstance.

Everything else is foreplay.