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**FEMALE
CHAUVINIST
PIGS**



Women
and the Rise
of Raunch Culture

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Five

PIGS IN TRAINING

T h e r e ' s a rumor going around that "rainbow parties" are the latest teen rage. Rainbow parties are good old-fashioned slumber parties, with a distinctly contemporary twist: All the girls in attendance put on a different color of lipstick, invite over one lucky boy, and then one by one they treat him to oral sex until voila! His penis is a spectral color chart.

Everyone talks about rainbow parties, but no one will admit to actually having been at one, which leads me to believe that rainbow parties are more like unicorns than like typical Friday nights. (Rainbow parties are not to be confused with rainbow *gather-*

ings, which also involve teens, bright colors, and casual sex, but take place in large wilderness areas, usually out West, where there are rock bands and camping and crafts besides fellatio.) If rainbow parties are a fiction, however, the climate in which they are plausible is entirely real.

In December 2002, a middle-school girl performed fellatio on the high school boy sitting next to her on the school bus in Kingston, Massachusetts, while their classmates watched. The same thing had happened with a pair of seventh-graders on a school bus back in 1999 in Talbot County, Maryland, where an eighth-grade girl also fellated her neighbor during a crowded study hall. These incidents may have inspired two thirteen-year-olds in Beaver County, Pennsylvania, who were suspended for engaging in a round of oral sex (her on him) in the back of a school bus during a spring field trip in 2004.

In the winter of 2004, an eighth-grade girl at Ho-race Mann, one of the top private schools in New York City, made a digital recording of herself masturbating and simulating fellatio on a Swiffer mop. She sent the clip to a classmate she liked, and in a show of gallantry that could come only from a teenage boy, he promptly broadcast the clip to all of his friends. Soon after, someone with the screen name "nyprivateschool" posted the entire thing on Friendster, a Web site where people of all ages can put up their own profiles, link to their friends, meet their friends' friends, and form expanded online communities.

After the digital video went up on Friendster, people started calling the school "Ho Mann" and referring to the incident as Swiffergate. As for the eighth-grader, like Paris Hilton before her, the dissemination of her amateur porn swiftly resulted in a major uptick in her level of popularity and celebrity. "People said they saw her walking down the hallway giving auto-graphs," said a seventeen-year-old senior at Manhattan's Trinity School named Talia.*

"At our senior retreat we all did raps, little skits," one of her classmates added. "One of the lines was: *It was the year of Paris Hilton and the Ho Mann ho!*"

There was more blow job trouble later that year at Fieldston, another elite New York City private school. A white female freshman had oral sex with a black male freshman. He dumped her soon after, and she retaliated by calling him the n-word in an instant message to a girlfriend and saying some other pretty awful things. The girl who received the IM told a couple other people about it, and somebody printed it out at school the next day. It quickly ended up in the headmaster's hands. "Then there was an assembly and the girl gave a written apology which someone else read," said Daniel, a Fieldston junior. "The girl was in school for a day. Then she was suspended. Then the disciplinary committee met and they deliberated for like three hours and then they asked her to leave." She was punished, to be sure, but she was also the talk of the town.

*Pseudonyms are used for subjects under the age of eighteen.

On a Saturday afternoon that spring at a shop-ping mall in Connecticut called the Stamford Town Center, I asked some teens if they could imagine similar incidents occurring at their own schools. Alexa, a junior at Oyster Bay High who was looking at dangly earrings, said she would "definitely expect something like this." She wore a T-shirt that said GOATS REALLY LIKE TO NIBBLE above a cartoon goat who appeared to be feeding off her newly sprung breast. "In my school, what was very popular was seventh- or eighth- or ninth-grade girls hooking up or having sex, whatever, with junior and senior guys," she said. "Parents kept calling the school, like, why is this senior at my house when my daughter is a freshman? They dressed so provocatively, the guys couldn't really tell how old the girls were . . . all they see is a hot girl."

Like a lot of teens, Alexa's classmates usually wore "tank tops with little Abercrombie skirts," she said. "I call them belts because they're so short they might as well be." As if on cue, a trio in tanks and belts came giggling out of the store Forever 21. Two of them said they were twelve, the third was thirteen. Everybody said they wore thongs. (The thong is a literal byproduct of the sex industry. In 1939, New York City mayor Fiorello La Guardia insisted that the city's exotic dancers cover their genitals for the World's Fair, and the thong was born to placate his decree while exposing the maximum amount of skin. Now they are the underpants of choice for pubescent girls.

I saw Hello Kitty thongs for sale at the mall; Abercrombie & Fitch—which markets to seven- to fourteen-year-olds—makes a thong that says WINK WINK and another that declares EYE CANDY; the teen chain store Hot Topic sells a Cat in the Hat thong; Delia's has a little cotton thong with Bart Simpson on the front and another that asks FEELING LUCKY? with a green four-leaf clover stamped on the crotch. The urban youth Web site Dr. Jay's has rhinestone Play-boy bunny thongs with matching camisoles. When the *Washington Post* asked Hugh Hefner if he was concerned about his company's attire being marketed to teens he replied, "I don't care if a baby holds up a Playboy bunny rattle.")

Alexa looked pensive. "Actually, I guess some-thing already *has* happened at my school," she said and pulled a folded piece of paper out of her purse. It was a printout of her classmate Jen's blog from Live-Journal, a Web site with over three million users that is extremely popular with teens, particularly teen girls. (It's similar to Friendster in that it is ultimately a way for people to meet, or at least cybermeet.) The printout from Jen's LiveJournal blog read: "I think it's funny how you say: 'i don't need to cry acid tears to get attention, only wear a low-cut shirt' so basically you're admitting that you're a slut? That's what I thought, so shut your big ass mouth that's been stretched out from those 5 dicks you sucked about 10 minutes ago and flicking listen up bitch."

The low-cut shirt-wearing subject of the rant, a

freshman, distributed copies of the blog throughout the school, thus ensuring that everyone knew she was accused of dressing provocatively and fellating promiscuously . . . which is not really all that surprising when you consider that appearing slutty and getting recognition for it (she was suspended) are the fast track to heightened female stardom right now, in high school as in life.

What all of these adolescent incidents have in common are, of course, exhibitionism and oral sex—oral sex for the boys, that is. Like the mythical rainbow parties, these situations revolve around girls giving erotic performances and boys literally lying back and enjoying the benefits. "A lot of guys expect oral sex," Talia said. "Not girls . . . people would think they were weird if they did." (That sentiment was echoed almost unanimously by the fifty young people I spoke to between the ages of twelve and eighteen; there is no clinical data available comparing the percentage of girls versus boys who perform oral sex.) I asked Talia if most girls expected *any* kind of reciprocal sexual gratification for their services. "I don't think most girls are expecting to have orgasms in high school," she concluded, "but most guys are. Oh, definitely."

Jessica, a senior from Southern California, keeps a home page on LiveJournal—a mosaic of pictures of Paris Hilton with the caption, "You are a blonde sickeningly happy and popular, some would consider you flaky as they come. It's probably just because they're

jealous of your happiness. I mean . . . you have the looks, the lover, and the popularity . . . what more is there to life?" Besides Paris Hilton, Jessica said she looked up to Pamela Anderson: "i love their style and i have blue eyes and color my hair blonde and watch my weight," she said, via instant messenger. She characterized her social group as sexually active, saying that oral sex was extremely common "especially for guys," but for girls "not so much, i think it may be cuz they're less comfortable with having someone down there." Comparing oral sex to intercourse, Jessica said that "it's not much of a difference" because both are "super casual." "I think these days, people at my age, (around 16/17) are so desperate, they don't really care who they get it from," she concluded.

Part of the reason they are so indiscriminate in their choice of partners is that the quality of these sexual encounters in terms of feeling or meaning isn't really the point. Jessica described sex as something they engaged in primarily for bragging rights. "yeah, i have a good example for you! okay so like every weekend, i get together with a group of friends, guys and girls, and we end up playing this game called 'slut on the bus.' every player puts their hands up and takes turns saying things like 'i never had sex' 'i never watched porn' etc and if the other players have done that thing, they put a finger down. first person to put all ten fingers down wins! 'slut on the bus."

These are not stories about girls getting what they want sexually, they are stories about girls gain-

ing acclaim socially, for which their sexuality is a tool. While it would be "weird" for a teen girl to pursue sexual gratification, it is crucial that she seem sexy—raunchy, willing, wild. (That's where the Inter-net really comes in handy. It allows young women to act out in front of the maximum number of eyes.) The Swiffer sucker and her compatriots at Fieldston and Oyster Bay High weren't so much experimenting with sex as experimenting with celebrity, albeit a cheesy, tacky, rainbow party-esque version—the kind that's the most popular and pervasive in our culture today. As one hipster from the senior class at the progressive, elite Saint Ann's School in Brooklyn Heights said, "There's something so *Girls Gone Wild* about this. Like videotaping yourself giving a blow job to a Swiffer? It seems like the kind of idea you'd get watching bad reality TV." Which, of course, many Americans do: Bad reality TV is the most rapidly proliferating genre on television. You can almost imagine a show called *Slut on the Bus* as the next *Survivor* spin-off. Adolescents are not inventing this culture of exhibitionism and conformity with their own fledgling creative powers. Teens are reflecting back our slobbering culture in miniature.

Life is pretty good if you're David. He already had everything going for him: huge, ocean-blue eyes, a blond goatee, a coveted summer job as a ball boy for his hometown baseball team, the Oakland As,

and the pleasant cockiness of a seventeen-year-old guy who is used to things working out. But after a fly ball hit him in the face during a late August game and a clip of the incident was played on ESPN Sport Center, David became a temporary local celebrity. People whom he had never met before started coming up to him to say *Nice play!* and more girls than usual were smiling at him in the halls at school. Not a bad set of circumstances in which to begin your senior year.

"Plus I have a really great schedule," he said over an iced coffee after his first day of classes. "I only have to be there Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. I can go skiing, I can go to Tahoe for the week-end, I can do whatever. And my classes are really cool: We're reading James Baldwin and Tupac [Shakur]. It'll be a great year. So that'll be nice."

David waved every twenty minutes or so at the passing trios of girls in tight, low-rider jeans and tank tops milling around outside the Jamba Juice and the Peet's Coffee and the Noah's New York Bagels that sit in a row on Mountain Boulevard, about a half an hour east of San Francisco. This was in the wealthy part of Oakland, where the cars were mostly Volvos, Saabs, and Range Rovers, within walking distance from Head-Royce, the small, private high school that David and his friends attended. These were teens whose parents paid a lot of attention—and money—to their children's preparation for successful futures. The Head-Royce campus spread over fourteen acres

with views of the San Francisco bay, the average class size was fifteen, and tuition for high school students was over \$20,000 a year. For fun, they would occasionally go into the city to try their luck at the bars with their fake IDs, and David and his male friends had a "tradition" of going to a San Francisco strip club when one of them turned eighteen. But mostly their social life was local: Mountain Boulevard after school, weekend nights partying at the house of whoever's parents were out of town, the occasional dance, the regular sporting events, the weekly boys' poker night.

"We need a guys' night out, because at a party the main objective is like getting a girl's number or getting with a girl," David explained. "I have a friend who's crazy . . . at the end of the night he's just not happy if he's not hooking up." I asked him if by hooking up he meant actual sex or just fooling around. "It depends," David said. "It's like with some of his regular girls, that will happen."

David said that generally, his classmates were not promiscuous, but that looking loose was the defining characteristic of his female friends' style. "There's not really any sluts at my school, but if you walked in there on your first day, you'd think my whole school was sluts. Everyone's in tight, white pants and little skirts and little shirts. I know girls who've gone on the pill even though they're not having sex just so their boobs would get bigger."

There's a lot to look at if you're a guy, and a lot

of pressure to make yourself worth looking at if you are a girl. David described the typical female getup as a uniform: a slut uniform. "Guys can wear all different styles," he said, flapping the front of the blue polo shirt he was wearing. (In fact, he looked pretty much the same as the male seniors did when I was in high school: sunglasses, cargo shorts, flip-flops. Guy wear.) "Guys try to make a match, but you throw on some clothes and you're just who you are and you hope the girls like you. If guys try too hard, they get labeled metrosexual or gay."

That day at school, David had been sitting on one of the big couches in the hallway at Head-Royce with a friend. A middle-school girl (who was twelve or thirteen) walked by and caught his friend's eye. So she pulled up her shirt, pulled out the strap of her thong from under the side of her skirt, and snapped it at him. "When you see that, your first reaction as a guy is that you think, *That girls wants it*. Wants you. Wants any guy out there," said David. "But honestly they don't. They're just dressing that way. It's not like it used to be where you'd see a girl and she'd be really flirtatious with you and you'd get that signal like, *Oh, she might like me*. Now, every girl is really flirtatious. It seems like girls are trying almost to suck up to the guys."

An example, he said, would be all the lap dancing and girl-on-girl action at school dances. "There's this whole stereotype, and it's probably largely true, that guys kind of like two girls kissing each other. So

you'll see a guy sitting on a chair—at, you know, a *high school dance*—and two girls will just go up and give him this huge lap dance and start making out. You see it and you're sitting there thinking, Okay, maybe this is what this girl is into, but probably not because she's been with my friends or she's been with me: I know she likes boys. So I think she's just doing it to appeal to the guys . . . always trying to find this *new way in* to appeal to the guys."

One of David's best female friends, Anne, agreed. "Definitely girls hook up with other girls because they know the guys will like it," she said. "They think, *Then the guys are going to want to hook up with me and give me a lot of attention* . . . definitely. If they think a guy's going to like it, they'll do it."

The transition from being little people focused on playing games to being little people focused on looking lickerish is swift and powerful. Robin, a classmate of David and Anne's, said she was "always the biggest dork in school until sixth grade, when it clicked in my head you had to dress a certain way. It's amazing how fast it happened . . . going from where a couple of my friends still played with stuffed animals to wearing short skirts that barely covered my butt and going to eighth-grade parties. Sexually, we didn't really do any-thing, but you wanted to *look* like you did."

Robin said that there had been a recent push for a dress code at Head-Royce. "Teachers felt it was distracting for girls to be wearing short skirts and little tank tops; in middle school everyone wears basically

their underwear." The proposed dress code was abandoned because the idea of such regimentation was wildly unpopular in the school's liberal East Bay locale. "There was so much backlash," said Robin, "guys said they would come to school in miniskirts to protest." Her own objections to the prospect of a minimum fabric requirement were practical. "They were talking about not having your bra straps showing, which was just ridiculous because with half the shirts that the girls have now that happens. The principal asked me what I thought about the dress code, and [I said] if it happens, all of the girls are going to need new clothes."

It's interesting that the teachers were concerned about *boys* getting distracted. Teenage boys tend to find teenage girls distracting no matter what they are wearing. As David put it, "What girls don't understand is guys *always* want girls. If every girl dressed casually, you'd still like girls. It's like, you don't have to exhaust yourselves." The people who are really distracted by the competition to look and seem sexy are the girls themselves.

The most popular creative outlet for adolescent female energy seems to be the expression of imaginary licentiousness through gesture, demeanor, dress. Of course, teenage girls have long been wiling away the hours doing each other's nails and applying facial masks; the years when puberty sets in and casts its transformative spell on brain and body are the years in which people grapple and play with their new-

found sexual powers. But there is now a rigidly specific message girls are required to convey before they even grasp its meaning.

"To dress the skankiest, I know that sounds terrible, but that would be the one way we all compete. Since seventh grade, the skankier, the smaller, the more cleavage, the better," said Anne. "I wasn't particularly sexual then," when she was in seventh grade, when she was *twelve*, "but I wanted guys to want me, to want to hook up with me, I guess . . . even though I didn't want to hook up with them. I always wanted all the guys to think I was the hottest one."

Anne may very well have been the hottest one: She was a tall, tan girl with lovely, light freckles across her cheeks, long limbs, and silky gold hair. Her beauty was made poignant by the way you could still see what she must have looked like as a little girl when she grinned. As we spoke she touched her thin, exposed stomach constantly. "My mom had to say, If you weigh less than a certain amount you're grounded," Anne told me. Where David was difficult to silence on baseball, books, photography, the merits and drawbacks of small schools versus big universities, and the shape he imagined for his future, Anne seemed to have only one truly engrossing passion: her looks. She expressed interest in becoming a graphic designer and talked a little about the year she had spent on an exchange program abroad. But no topic elicited the same kind of intensity from Anne as her own appearance.

"For me it's all attached to guys," she said. "Like I have this weird link between certain guys and my own self-worth. It's like the skinnier I can be, the more they'll like me. There's this one guy, John, he's David's friend, we went out a really long time ago. Ever since then we've had this sexual chemistry. He never gives me what I want, never shows me that he really likes me, or he does but in small amounts. So I always feel like if I can wear something that he likes or if I can be really thin or if I can do certain things to my physical appearance, he'll like me more."

She had evidence, albeit inverted, to support this idea. "John gets mad at me if I wear sweatpants," she said. "One time I went to Ecuador and I lost a lot of weight and he was, like, *disgusted* by me. He got mad at me because I didn't have an ass anymore. I was in tenth grade."

Anne tried hard to hold up her end of the bargain—to be as hot and to wear as little as possible. Her demand in return was that John reserve his attention for her exclusively. In fact, her aspiration was for boys in general to make her the sole focus of their appreciation. "I remember one time I was at John's house with him and David, and I was looking at the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue," Anne said. "I got in a really, really terrible mood and I wouldn't talk because I thought Heidi Klum was just so pretty, and I was, like, *mad*. I get really upset when guys find girls really attractive. Because I want that attention."

Though she was deeply invested in getting atten-

tion for her sexuality, Anne's own experiences with sex had been disappointing. She and John lost their virginity together, an encounter she had hoped would be romantic and "involve a lot of emotion," but it turned out otherwise. "My first time I said that I wanted to be in love and he, like, got mad at me. He was like, Oh, that's not gonna happen, are you kid-ding me? So then I said, Oh, wait, I don't think I'll be in love; it's okay. I guess I didn't really want to, but I told him I did. He was like, I feel like I'm *raping* you! He broke up with me a week later."

For most of her friends, Anne said, things were similar: Sex was something you did to fit in more than something you did for pleasure. "It's an ego thing. We talk about it like at lunch on the patio; people think it's cool. It's competitive: who can hook up with the most guys and who can have sex, who can be the most . . . like my friend is having her eighteenth birthday party and she wants to have strippers there."

Anne asked me if things were different when I was in high school. I told her that it was the same in the sense that you always wished you could be the prettiest and the most popular, the one who guys wanted to be with and girls wanted to be. But the obligation to present yourself as the skankiest—which means the smuttiest, the loosest, the most wanton—even before you've become libidinous (before you are "particularly sexual," to borrow Anne's phrase), is something new. When I went to high

school, you wanted to look good and you wanted to look cool, but you would have been embarrassed to look slutty.

Anne looked at me, baffled. "So how did you get the guy?" she asked. "*Charm?*"

Anne is not making lewd tapes of herself and putting them up on the Internet. She's not doing anything untoward on the back of the school bus. She isn't even snapping her thong at boys in the hall. But performing is still an engrossing part of her life. "I definitely feel like because I've put so much consciousness into my appearance in the past, now I get scared of having a relationship that's actually based on what's inside of me," she said.

Monitoring her appearance and measuring the response to it have been her focal point. If her looks were a kind of hobby—if dressing and grooming and working out were things she did for pleasure—then the process would be its own reward. But she spoke of her pursuit as a kind of Sisyphean duty, one that many of her friends had charged themselves with as well.

If girls seem more focused on what is expected of them than on what they want, they aren't the only ones. In her book *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk About Sexuality* (2004), Deborah L. Tolman, associate director and senior research scientist at the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College,

observed that "in the many hundreds of studies that have been done to determine what predicts adolescent girls' sexual behavior, only a handful ha[ve] identified girls' sexual desire as a potential factor." For understandable reasons, our overwhelming focus on teen sexuality in the wake of AIDS has been on danger and "risk behavior." Tolman writes that "this tendency, an artifact of public policy and funded research geared toward avoiding the risks of sexuality, leads us to single out girls as the receptacle of our concerns."

Again, there is a basis in logic here: Girls are the only ones who get pregnant, and girls can contract HIV more easily from intercourse than boys can. But if our fears for teens and teen girls in particular are justifiable, our response has not been. We are pouring an enormous amount of money into abstinence-only education—that is, sexual education that promotes virginity and discredits or disregards contraception—despite the fact that not a single study has shown this approach *works*. Under the administration of George W. Bush, annual funding of \$168 million was allocated for fiscal year 2005 to three federal programs designed to promote abstinence-only education. (Those are Section 510 of the Social Security Act, the teen pregnancy prevention section of the Adolescent Family Life Act, and the Special Projects of Regional and National Significance program.) In total, this country has spent nearly \$1 billion on abstinence education since 1996.

Eighty-six percent of public school districts that offer sex ed require the promotion of abstinence, and 35 percent require abstinence be taught as the sole option for unmarried people; both teach that contraception is ineffective or don't talk about it at all. A December 1, 2004, report from Representative Henry Waxman (D-CA) concluded that the most popular federally funded abstinence-only sex education curricula contain distortions of medical evidence and basic scientific facts. There is not a single federally funded program to promote comprehensive sex ed that covers both abstinence and contraception, de-spite the fact that more than 75 percent of parents would like their children to be taught about condoms, abortion, sexual orientation, how to deal with the pressure to have sex, and how to deal with sex it-self, according to a study conducted by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation called "Sex Education in America: A View from Inside the Nation's Class-rooms."

What teens have to work with, then, are two wildly divergent messages. They live in a candyland of sex . . . every magazine stand is a gumdrop castle of breasts, every reality show is a bootylicious Tootsie Roll tree. And these are hormonal teenagers: This culture speaks to them. But at school, the line given to the majority of them about sex is just say no. They are taught that sex is wrong until you have a wedding (they have seen those in the magazines and on the reality shows too, huge affairs that require boatloads of

Casablanca lilies and mountains of crystal), and then suddenly it becomes natural and nice.

If you process this information through the average adolescent mental computer, you end up with a printout that reads something like this: Girls have to be hot. Girls who aren't hot probably need breast implants. Once a girl is hot, she should be as close to naked as possible all the time. Guys should like it. Don't have sex.

It's interesting (in a nauseating kind of way) to watch educators struggle to make this message coherent. In 2001, I went to the New Jersey Coalition for Abstinence Education's conference in Plainsboro, which was attended by teachers from the Northeast who needed to fulfill a minimum requirement of one hundred hours of continuing education. Hundreds of teachers, mostly women, were gathered in a huge auditorium inside a massive conference center in the middle of nowhere, sitting through hours of speeches while photographs of garish herpes lesions and magnified roving hordes of crabs were projected on a screen over the stage. (That night, I dreamt I got a rare form of lethal mouth cancer from a particularly passionate French kiss. I woke up anxious and aroused.)

My favorite presentation focused on the misadventures of one Miss Tape. An extremely tall speaker named Mike Worley introduced himself to us by listing his basketball credentials and then bragging that he was a twenty-eight-year-old virgin. (He hadn't yet

met *the one*, so there had been no *big day*, so why would he have had sex?) He told us there were certain rules he imposed on his dating life in order to maintain his purity: A movie with friends was always better than a movie alone, a movie at the theater was always preferable to a movie on the VCR, and if a young lady managed to make it back to his bachelor pad, the blinds had to be open, his halogen light had to be on the highest setting of brightness, and of course under no circumstances could she go into his bedroom. People, teenagers, could tinker with the specifics when they set their own guidelines, he said, but the most important thing was to never, ever take off your pants.

To illustrate his not terribly complex point, Worley called a stocky young man from the audience onto the stage and then pulled out a length of clear packing tape. "This is Miss Tape. She looks pretty good, right? She's tall, right? She's ... what else is she?" Worley raised his eyebrows at us encouragingly.

"Thin!" someone shouted out.

"Right! She's thin," he said, and wiggled the piece of tape so it undulated in the air. "And she has nice curves!" Worley winked.

"So they have sex." To illustrate the act of coitus, Worley wrapped the piece of tape around the volunteer's arm. After a few more minutes of make believe, we came to the inevitable bump in the road when Worley said the volunteer had decided to move on to other chicks. Worley ripped the piece of tape off his arm.

"Ouch," said the volunteer.

"How does she look now?" Worley asked, holding the crumpled Miss Tape up for inspection.

I fought back the urge to yell, "like a dirty whore?"

If I, as an adult, find this kind of educational exercise unconvincing, shame-inducing, and lame, imagine how well it works to influence the impulse control of the average teenager, who (I like to think) is less rational, less self-aware, and more hormonal. In addition to being laced with misogyny (do you want to be defiled like Miss Tape or do you want to be a nice, clean, thin virgin?), the abstinence-only approach has the disadvantage of being unrealistic. Planned Parenthood has repeatedly pointed out that relying on abstinence is ahistorical; teenagers have been experimenting with sex since the beginning of time. Even if we all agreed that teenagers shouldn't be sexually active under any circumstances—and therefore didn't need to know anything about contraception or disease prevention—they are. The majority of high school students graduate without their virginity, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Eighty percent of Americans become sexually active while they're still in their teens. (If history is any indication, that number will continue to rise: As recently as 1982, that number was only 64 percent. In 1968, the year of the summer of love, it was 42 percent.)

Though sexual activity among teenagers barely

varies across the developed world, the rate of teen pregnancy in the United States is extremely high compared to the numbers in other wealthy countries. According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI), a nonprofit organization that conducts research and policy analysis on worldwide reproductive health (and is quoted and respected by both liberal and conservative groups), Japan and most western European countries have adolescent pregnancy rates of less than 40 per 1,000. (Uber-progressive Holland shines with only 12 pregnancies per 1,000.) The numbers go up in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, where there are between 40 and 69 teen pregnancies out of every 1,000. But in the United States, we have more than 80 teen pregnancies per 1,000. Rather than being on par with other nations of comparable privilege, our teen pregnancy rates match those of Belarus, Bulgaria, and Romania. On their Web site, AGI offers a succinct explanation for this fairly pathetic state of affairs: "The primary reasons why U.S. teenagers have the highest rates of pregnancy, child-bearing and abortion among developed countries is less overall contraceptive use and less use of the pill or other long-acting reversible hormonal methods, which have the highest use-effectiveness rates. Factors in cross-country differences in teenagers' contraceptive use include negative societal attitudes toward teenage sexual relationships, restricted access to and high cost of reproductive health services, [and] ambivalence toward contraceptive methods." AGI also

points out that "though teenagers in the United States have levels of sexual activity similar to their Canadian, English, French and Swedish peers, they are more likely to have shorter and more sporadic sexual relationships."

By any measure, the way we educate young people about sexuality is not working. We expect them to dismiss their instinctive desires and curiosities even as we bombard them with images that imply that lust is the most important appetite and hotness the most impressive virtue. Somehow, we expect people who are by definition immature to make sense of this contradictory mishmash. Our national approach to the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy is predicated on the assumption that teenagers will want so badly to maintain their purity for marriage—despite the fact that half of their parents' marriages end in divorce—that they will ignore their own hormones, ignore the porn stars on MTV and all the blogs and blow jobs on the Internet, and do as their teachers tell them. Unsurprisingly, teenagers are not cooperating with this plan.

Rather than only telling teens why they shouldn't have sex, perhaps we also ought to be teaching them why they should. We are doing little to help them differentiate their sexual desires from their de-sire for attention. Many of the girls I spoke to said sex for them was "an ego thing" rather than a lust thing.

Anne said of her first time, "I guess I didn't really want to, but I told him I did." And hers is not an uncommon experience; about a quarter of girls between ages fifteen and nineteen describe their first time as "voluntary but unwanted," according to the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. The only message that seems to be successfully transmitted to girls about sex and sexiness is that it is something they need to embody to be cool. What's saddening is not that they will end up used goods like Miss Tape or unfit to wear white dresses to their fantasy weddings, but that from the very beginning of their experiences as sexual beings they are conceiving of sex as a performance you give for attention, rather than as something thrilling and interesting you engage in because you *want* to.

To write *Dilemmas of Desire*, Deborah Tolman interviewed two sets of teenage girls, one at an urban public school and one at a wealthier suburban public school, asking them specifically about their experience of wanting, as opposed to their experience of "sex," which so often becomes a conversation about being wanted. She was struck by "how confusing it is to develop a sexual identity that leaves their sexuality out," which was what she heard most of her subjects attempting. Whether or not they had had sex, the girls had remarkably difficult times experiencing or expressing sexual desire. Tolman describes girls who seemed to have "silent bodies," who found a way to ignore or muffle any arousal because they were afraid really feeling it would lead them into the treacherous

territory of pregnancy and disease. They could not allow themselves to experience "embodied sexual de-sire," as Tolman calls it, and, unsurprisingly, they experienced a great deal of confusion and anxiety instead.

Tolman compares these girls to Freud's earliest patients—intelligent, articulate women who suffered "hysterical" symptoms such as the loss of feeling or movement in parts of their bodies because they were so detached from their sexual needs. After (primitive) therapy, their bodies came back to life. Once these women had the opportunity to acknowledge their own sexuality, they could "embody their desire rather than disembody themselves," Tolman writes. Since we are talking about teenagers here, it's important to note that Freud's women didn't have to *have* sex to feel better, they first and foremost had to be allowed to have sexual *feelings*.

Tolman also observed girls with "confused bodies," who couldn't determine if the emotional wanting and physical excitement they experienced was sexual. One girl described being "all hyper and stuff . . . I guess you could say it was a sexual feeling." But it also could have been a feeling of anxiety, or fear, or antsiness. And how was she to know which was which? Sexual feeling was new to her, as it is to all teenagers.

Though these girls didn't experience or had trouble recognizing sexual desire, some of them *had* experienced sex—it was something that "just happened"

to many of them. Like Anne, some didn't really want to, but told their partners they did. Others had silent mouths to match their silent bodies and said nothing. Tolman points out that "*not* feeling sexual desire may put girls in danger and 'at risk.' When a girl does not know what her own feelings are, when she disconnects the apprehending psychic part of herself from what is happening in her own body, she then becomes especially vulnerable to the power of others' feelings." Simply put, you have to know what you want in order to know what you don't want.

Tolman isn't suggesting we should encourage teen girls to run out and have sex, she is saying that we should stop focusing all of our attention on sexual intercourse at the expense of educating our children about sexuality as a larger, more complex, more fundamental part of being human. Importuning them to be virgins isn't working; what do we have to lose?

There is another side to this debate, of course, and to try and understand why so many people are resistant to broader sexual education I called Peggy Cowan. I had first met her at the abstinence-only conference in New Jersey which she helped organize in 2001, and when we spoke again in 2004 she had become the president of the New Jersey Physicians Advisory Group. She explained her conviction that adolescents shouldn't be taught about contraception like so: "We don't tell our kids, 'Don't drink and drive but if you do, wear a seat belt.'" Because this is true, and because Cowan is an earnest, polite person, at

this point in our conversation I hoped I would be able to respect her perspective and learn from her. "People say 'scare tactics' as if we have an agenda, but my agenda is medical," she said. "One out of four teens has an STD! I had three teenage daughters and I was scared to death . . . looking around, seeing all the pitfalls out there. I had single sex ed and I wish they had that now because it protects modesty; now kids are too comfortable talking about things they shouldn't talk about. I heard of one woman teacher who tells kids how to masturbate. Explaining it! About fantasizing when you shower!"

I asked Cowan if she was against teenagers masturbating.

"I can't say that a young person, when they become sexually aroused, can stop just short of sex."

"Not mutual masturbation," I said. "Just masturbation. Kids shouldn't hear about that? Wouldn't it help them to resist sex?" Is it not, actually, exactly the kind of thing we should encourage teens to do with their very real, entirely natural, impulses and curiosities at a time in their lives when they may well be too young to deal with the ramifications of sex?

"I think that's intimate personal stuff," Cowan said. "I don't know that I have a position on that. No one's ever asked me that question before."

Well, everything to do with sexuality is intimate and personal. But if we are bold enough to cross that boundary to tell young people not to have intercourse, surely, while we're at it, it is appropriate—it is

our obligation—to talk to them about how to understand and cope with and enjoy their sexuality. Sex is different from drugs; we can't tell them to just say no and leave it at that. Sexuality isn't something they can opt out of.

Cowan was right that one in four people under twenty-five has a sexually transmitted disease. But, like all abstinence-only advocates, she was puzzlingly unwilling to confront the fact that there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that the promotion of abstinence at the expense of comprehensive education helps to remedy this situation. On the contrary; every single peer-reviewed clinical study on these issues has concluded that the more people are educated, the less they spread and contract STDs.

Clearly, part of the problem is that sex ed in this country has been commandeered by the far right—as has the White House and with it the funding that fuels abstinence-only programs. But if conservatives are averse to any discussion of sex outside of marriage, liberals often seem allergic to the idea of imposing sexual boundaries or limits . . . and simply telling kids sex is fine isn't necessarily any more helpful than telling them sex is bad. Both of these approaches can ultimately have the same result: a silence about the complexities of desire, feminine desire in particular.

One seventeen-year-old girl I interviewed in Oakland (in the most legislatively progressive area in this country) said her mother "doesn't really care how

sexy we are. She was really involved in the women's movement, so she thinks whatever you do to feel se-cure and confident is fine." The tricky thing is that adolescents don't automatically know what to do to make themselves feel sexy or secure or confident. They sometimes have "confused bodies" and they frequently have confused heads. Adolescent girls in particular—who are blitzed with cultural pressure to be hot, to *seem* sexy—have a very difficult time learning to recognize their own sexual desire, which would seem a critical component of *feeling* sexy.

Many of the issues confronting teenage girls are the same ones affecting grown women: the prioritizing of performance over pleasure; a lack of freedom to examine their own varied, internal desires; an obligation to look as lewd as possible. (A few days after the 2004 presidential election, Paris Hilton was on the red carpet at P. Diddy's birthday party at Cipriani, lifting up the voluminous skirt of her pink gown and exposing her vagina to the paparazzi, thus outdoing her friend Tara Reid, who accidentally exposed a nipple to photographers at that same party. All I could think of was Anne's comment: "To dress the skankiest . . . that would be the one way we all compete.") But whereas older women were around for the women's movement itself, or at least for the period when its lessons were still alive in the country's collective memory, teenage girls have only the here and now. They have never known a time when "ho" wasn't part of the lexicon, when sixteen-year-olds didn't get

breast implants, when porn stars weren't topping the best-seller lists, when strippers weren't mainstream. (The April 2005 issue of *Harper's* magazine reported that a Palo Alto middle school had a career day in which a speaker touted stripping as a profession.) None of this can possibly be "ironic" for teens because it's their whole truth—there's no backdrop of idealism to temper these messages. If there's a way in which grown women are appropriating raunch as a rebellion against the constraints of feminism, we can't say the same for teens. They never had a feminism to rebel against.