

Chapter 1

what's a girl to do?

This is a story about a girl who grew up believing what many girls believe—that one day she would fall in love with the man of her dreams, marry him, have kids, and live happily ever after. Yet as she grew older, all she felt was confused. The messages she was getting—from her parents, her friends, her school, the media—about looks and love and sex and relationships all seemed to be pointing in different directions.

i blame Cinderella. And Barbie, for that matter. Ever since I was a little girl, even though my parents were hippies who pushed the Sunshine Family over Barbie and public television over Disney, I grew up with visions of

Prince Charming and Ken dancing in my head. That vision involved meeting a man, falling in love, knowing he was The One, and then having children. I grew up believing that sex happened within that very specific and societally prescribed realm. And despite not knowing exactly what sex was, I knew it was something that two grownups did *in private* when they loved each other *very much*.

I clung to that ideal, like a lot of young girls do. I played bride and wedding and happily ever after, and I assumed that one day, my perfect man and I would ride off into the sunset and go do that sex thing. The ongoing themes of love and sex and marriage were all included in the same brew, no one idea mutually exclusive from the others.

As I got older and outgrew my princess obsession, like many girls entering adolescence, I simply moved on to other media visions of love and sex and marriage. But they all communicated the same happily ever after message about falling in love and having sex. Occasionally, something would slip out about having sex before marriage, but it was generally assumed that marriage was in your future. Your *near* future. Unless, of course, you were a slut. And no one I knew was striving for that.

I grew up in a liberal household with parents who told me I could do anything I set my mind to, and be anyone I wanted to be. So when my own vision strayed from the clichéd one I was surrounded with, my parents were able to roll with the punches. When I was about eight or nine, I told

them, “When I grow up, I’m going to live in a penthouse in New York City, and I’m going to have lots of boyfriends. But I’m never going to get married and I’m never going to have any children and I’m going to be the first woman president of the United States.”

“You can be anything you like and live however you like,” my mom responded. “But you don’t have to make any of those decisions yet. You can change your mind a hundred times before you head out into the world—and even once you do.” So you see, I was groomed to think for myself, to be able to dissect the messages I encountered. Perhaps because of this training (or in spite of it), as early as high school, things just didn’t seem quite right to me. Every cultural standard that confronted me told me that sex before marriage was bad, that “nice” girls waited until marriage, that virginity was something your future husband expected of you.

Meanwhile, the media was blasting images—yes, even back then—of young girls who exuded sex appeal. Take the famous Calvin Klein ad from 1980 in which fifteen-year-old Brooke Shields purred, “Do you wanna know what comes between me and my Calvins? Nothing.” The underlying message was about sex and desirability, and even about her landing a man, despite her ridiculously young age. And wasn’t that what I was supposed to be looking for? I was ten years old, and I felt I *had* to look like her. At the same time, Brooke Shields was so distant a creature that it seemed preposterous to imagine myself ever being that seductive.

And yet every time someone said, “Make a wish,” that was mine: to be beautiful and sexy enough for men to want me. Forget about intelligence or wit; looking a certain way—sexy but not slutty, beautiful but not unattainable—was how you captured a man and got him to marry you. And although marriage seemed like a far-off concept, the idea of capturing men’s attention didn’t. I could see it in the ads, in the movies, and at the roller rink, as the girls threw back their feathered locks and shot the boys hanging on the rail at the rink’s edge that *look*.

Even then, though, I knew that at some point, some magical switch would turn off and girls would suddenly drop the “Don’t you want me?” game, and would just as quickly start playing the role of the “good girl”—to groom themselves into marriage material. I just didn’t understand how or when that was supposed to happen. As far as the boys were concerned, at some point they apparently stopped being kitten chasers and started becoming wife wanters. But when? And when were girls supposed to stop wanting to be the object of every boy’s desire and start wanting to keep house? I couldn’t figure out just what it was that men wanted, and I didn’t understand how I could possibly be two different women at the same time.

So, despite being raised by a liberated working mother and an equally feminist father, I still believed that becoming a wife was the one thing above all else that I must shoot for, because it was culturally ingrained in me that it would

prove my worth as a human being and a woman. And if you wanted to be a wife, you had to be “wife material,” and that meant being virginal, for one. It meant being one of the “good girls,” which was defined for me very early on. When I was in junior high and high school, there was still a solid line between nice girls and sluts, and there was no question about who was who. Of course, that delineation hasn't remained quite so clear. Today, nice girls aren't necessarily expected to retain their precious virginity before being labeled sluts, but there's no question that women are still struggling to claim our own sexuality and define for ourselves the sexual roles that continue to be mandated to and for us.

as a culture, we undoubtedly continue to deal with the problems that arise from conflicting messages about how we're supposed to behave, arguably more so now than when I was growing up. Jessica Valenti, author of *Full Frontal Feminism* and founder of Feministing.com, makes a living keeping her finger on the pulse of young women and the issues they face today. She writes, “Never mind trying to find an authentic sexuality in our fake-orgasm pop culture—it's near impossible to find *anything* that makes sense. There are all of these contradictions in porn/pop culture that blow my mind and make it all the more difficult for young women to find an authentic sexual identity.”¹ Ultimately, she concludes, what's expected of women is the impossible.

Her observations echo my very experiences—only fifteen years later. I suppose it's true that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

The media, the church, the politicians—everyone—wants to weigh in, and everyone has something different to say. Women experience a bizarre disconnect in which we are bombarded with images of sex—on television, in films, all over the print media—while receiving cultural messages that girls should strive to retain their purity. “We live in sexually interesting times, meaning a culture which manages to be simultaneously hyper-sexualized and to retain its Puritan underpinnings, in precisely equal proportions,” explains Laura Kipnis in her polemic *Against Love*.² And it doesn't stop there, because the messages not only are contradictory, but they also place an inexcusable emphasis on girls' bodies. And despite my parents' commitment to fighting that focus, it seeped into our home and my consciousness nevertheless.

I remember an argument my parents had the summer I turned sixteen, about a hot-pink string bikini that I'd bought for myself. Because I had purchased it with my own money, I didn't think I needed my parents' approval. It was just a bathing suit, after all. I had no idea that my purchase would incite such a conflict.

“Debbie, if she can fill the thing out, I don't see what the big deal is,” my dad said.

“Very nice,” my mother said.

“I'm just teasing,” he said.

"I know. It's just not the right time, okay? This is serious."

"I'm sorry. Your mother's right. You know I was just teasing, right?"

"I know."

"It's just, well, I don't know what to say about this stuff."

That was generally how my dad dealt with situations that he desperately wanted to lighten. His jokes didn't always go over well with my mom, especially when they affected my sister and me. It wasn't that our growing up "right" was any less important to my dad; it's just that he could turn anything into a joke, and my mother didn't always see the funny side of things.

My parents went on to argue about the importance of cultivating my sexual confidence versus the likelihood that men would look at me or treat me in a way that they wanted to avoid. "I don't want her boobs hanging out for every pervert to see," my mom told my father. "And besides, it's fashion to her, but it comes across as a statement of sexual availability to others."

"I'm still in the room, Mom," I said.

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Why does everything have to turn into a political discussion?" I asked.

"Because everything *is* political," my mother stated matter-of-factly. I didn't know what she meant then, but I certainly do now. The idea of the personal as political is something I became acutely aware of as a women's studies

minor in college, and it's continued to strike me daily ever since. I may be wearing an outfit I like, reading a book that interests me, or watching a movie that I enjoy for some perfectly valid reason, but others may read those actions differently, and I can't walk around with my head in the clouds, acting like that's not the case. There is no reality—there is only perception. My mother's strong feelings were a foundation for my approach to life. Thus, the way I wanted to look, dress, and be perceived became a quandary as I changed from a girl into a woman, trying to balance my mother's ideas with my thoughts and with the messages I was getting from the world around me.

Confounding as this situation was, the messages I received at home could sometimes be as confusing and mixed as the ones I got from the outside world. Although both my mother and my father encouraged my younger sister, Rachel, and me to be aware of the power we held as women, and to realize how important it was to hold our own in a world where our sexuality could be used against us, only our father was willing to talk to us about using it to our benefit. My mother saw that as profoundly antifeminist, a concept I later discovered was a divide that existed within the feminist movement—this idea of what a “real” feminist even looks like. Can a woman be sexy and seductive and still be a feminist? My mom belonged to the camp that believed it wasn't possible, and I definitely belong to the camp that thinks, *Oh, yes indeed.*

As much as my mother wanted us to be aware of the choices we were making, she wasn't always so self-aware when it came to her own decisions. Eating, for example, was a huge issue in our house. My mother always prepared healthy, well-rounded meals, and she expected my sister and me to eat everything on our plates, even the things we loathed. Yet while my father and Rachel and I ate our balanced meal—meat and starch and vegetable—my mother ate a Lean Cuisine. She was trying to maintain her weight for her health, she told us, and I don't doubt that was true. But the message was clear: What we were eating wasn't for weight loss. And she wasn't even eating smaller portions—she was eating something entirely different than we were.

Though my mother primarily emphasized the importance of our being smart and nice, espousing over and over her belief that being pretty didn't matter nearly as much, her concerted effort to lose weight left me feeling conflicted. Wasn't weight not simply connected, but central, to looks? So, despite my mother's explanations, her actions spoke volumes to my sister and me: We shouldn't be focused on looks, but it was okay that *she* was.

I got the message that it's okay to wear a bikini, but only in a vacuum in which reality can't intrude. Being pretty doesn't matter, but you don't want to get fat. Being interested in sex is healthy, but appearing sexually available can be dangerous. And so on. The fact that my mother's values often seemed

contradictory baffled me at times, but the signs the universe was sending me were outright dangerous.

The conflicting information that the media, parents, and other sources feed to girls and women leaves us in a space that can feel nearly impossible to navigate: We are told to be sexy, but not too sexy. We are told what is sexy, but wait—only for that minute, actually. We are told what to buy to become sexy—that we *have* to buy things to be sexy—but not slutty. We are told to be able partners, but not too able—because where would we have learned such things? We are told to be willing, but not on the prowl. These contradictions send a lot of women (and men) into a tailspin as we come into our own sexuality.

Glamour magazine has a column in its “Sex & Men” section called “Jake: A Man’s Opinion,” written by what the magazine calls “a real, live single guy.” Jake’s September 2007 column was titled “What’s Sexy, What’s Scary in Bed.” He opens the piece talking about a woman who bit his nipple—“hard,” he writes. He didn’t like it, and he sees this scenario as emblematic of a larger problem: Women are finally taking control and coming into our own sexually, and yet there are men like Jake who take issue with that, who feel as if women’s assertiveness (or sluttiness) belongs in a different realm. That behavior is for fake porn girls, not girls Jake wants to date. He blames the web, which he refers to as “that great, sometimes sordid bastion of exhibitionism”:

What's a woman to think . . . when she finds out her boyfriend spends hours . . . watching barely legal girls stripping in their bedrooms on YouTube? . . . But that's not necessarily what your boyfriend wants you to do—that's why we have YouTube (and, to a greater extreme, porn).³

excuse me? Virgin/whore complex, anyone? This column, in a mainstream magazine, speaks to the continued way in which we are maligned for our sexuality, yet are still expected to be sexual. “We want a lady in the street but a freak in the bed,” Usher sings to his tween and teen fans in his song “Yeah!” Notice that it has nothing to do with what *she* wants—just with what he expects.

Other media “experts” are propagating this balancing act as well. Laura Sessions Stepp, in a *Washington Post* article entitled “Cupid’s Broken Arrow,” actually suggests that sexually confident women cause impotence in men. One of the young men she interviewed for the article told her, “I know lots of girls for whom nothing is off limits. The pressure on the guys is a huge deal.”⁴

A girl willing to do anything? Presumably every guy’s fantasy, right? But this college junior is saying that a girl like this can actually feel like too much to deal with, and can prevent a guy from being the ladies’ man he might otherwise be. It doesn’t matter whether you’re talking about college girls or married women—the problem is the same. Women’s sexuality must somehow simultaneously exist and

not exist. And if men can't perform, we're to blame. Forget confusing—this is just plain not okay.

Unfortunately, when it comes to marriage, this issue doesn't go away; it only becomes magnified. No matter what most people have going on before they get married, it has to stop once they get married. When you date, you have the opportunity to try on different partners: the guy you dabble in S&M with; the girl you play doctor with; the partner who wants you to be a schoolgirl. But once you have a spouse, you're not only left with no outlets, you're also burdened by social definitions of marriage and of who you are expected to be—or become.

Even when sex plays a huge role in the premarital relationship, women are often surprised by the way things change once they become someone's wife and are suddenly expected to be Holly Homemakers, not sex kittens (though we're supposed to still be "desirable" to our husbands, whatever that means). And even if we're working full-time, we must also play the roles of überwife and supermom. We're expected to create an ideal balance, and we're supposed to magically know what that is at any given moment. The truth is, the messages we get are so mixed that it's impossible to know what men want—and *men* probably don't even know what men want.

Even the most liberated couples find themselves falling into traditional patterns once they're married—or even once they're exclusive. Shannon Davis, an assistant professor of

sociology at George Mason and the lead author of a 2007 international study entitled “Effects of Union Type on Division of Household Labor: Do Cohabiting Men Really Perform More Housework?” told *USA Today* that “the institution of marriage seems to have an effect on couples that traditionalizes their behavior, even if they view men and women as equals.”⁵

A man wants his wife to cook dinner, and he doesn't want her to take over in the bedroom. I am generalizing, of course, but it's a common and dangerous pattern. According to Stephanie Coontz, a professor of history and family studies at Evergreen State College and the author of *Marriage, a History*, “we have all inherited unconscious habits and emotional expectations that perpetuate female disadvantage in marriage.”⁶ We're raised to believe in an institution, and to follow the rules of that institution, whether or not it counters our own thinking and experiences. It's what we know, and it's what society values.

when I was a teenager, I felt completely at a loss as I tried to negotiate that space between what was expected of me and how I felt as my own sexual impulses started to kick in. How on earth was I supposed to figure out what men wanted, what I wanted, what was “right” when I couldn't get a straight answer from anyone or anything?

“It's strapless,” my mother said when I came out of the dressing room, wearing the dress I had been admiring for

weeks, the dress I longed to wear to the homecoming dance the fall of my junior year. "And it's way too sexy."

"Come on, Mom. Everyone's wearing dresses like this. They're in every magazine."

"I'm calling your father," she said. He was already on his way home from work, and we decided to wait at the store for him to arrive.

"Dance with me," my father said when he saw me standing there, wearing the dress of my dreams.

"What?" I asked, stunned.

"Come here. Dance with me." I lifted my arms and put them around my father's neck. We rocked back and forth for a couple of steps, and then he stopped and winked at me. "You pass," he said, dropping his arms and patting my shoulder. My mother and I must have looked completely perplexed. "It stayed up. So as far as I'm concerned, she can wear it."

My mother grumbled, but she let me get the dress. I imagine now that it must have been a confusing time for her as a parent, having been a college student in the '60s, when free love and sex reigned and drugs and rock 'n' roll were de rigueur. And here I was, growing up in this new era of AIDS and television programming that would have been considered scandalous just twenty years earlier.

"The world is changing so fast, Jenny," she would say to me. "I just want to protect you."

"You can't always protect me, Mom."

“I know, but I have to try. It’s all too sexy—the clothes, the TV, the music.” Strange how those words ring in my ears now, more than twenty years later, as I try to raise a daughter of my own in a world that makes that one look like the Cleavers’ by comparison.

This constant theme rang true throughout my upbringing—my parents seemed torn between allowing me to do what I wanted, because only I could know what was best for me, and keeping me under lock and key to protect me from exploring all of the things they had had no experience with during their own upbringings. It was a brave new world, and it made my mother much more nervous than it did my father.

Since I’m writing a book about my own open marriage, it seems imperative to address my parents’ marriage and how it impacted my worldview. My parents were married for thirty-three years, but they are no longer together. My dad left my mom when I was thirty, and, though it’s hard for me to admit this, he seems happier than I have ever seen him. My mother, on the other hand, continues to struggle with the breakup, even many years later. Looking back, I think my parents loved each other, and I believe they were happy—sometimes. I also know that they disagreed a lot, and that pretty early on, I sensed he was staying in the marriage for my sister’s and my sake. He left my mother for a short while when I was twelve, and then came back when my mother was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy

and stayed for eighteen more years. But things were the same, possibly even worse. I don't blame either of them for how their relationship played out. As far as I can tell, it was simply a marriage that didn't work.

My parents weren't physically affectionate with each other, although they were with Rachel and me. I distinctly remember the first time I saw my best friend's parents kissing: They looked at each other in a way I'd never seen my own parents act. I was embarrassed at first, wondering, *Is this the way parents are supposed to be?* Once, I saw the dad swat his wife on the butt with a dish towel. She giggled like a little girl and hugged him, the way the couples did on *The Love Boat*. I wanted that; I knew that much. We probably learn more about what we desire from seeing what we don't want than from seeing what we *do*. The lack of affection in my parents' marriage made me yearn to have a relationship in which I'd be hugged and kissed and looked at in "that way." I knew I didn't want any yelling. I knew I wanted to be happy. But the greatest lesson I took away from observing my parents was that I knew I wanted to have a marriage in which I could express my wants and needs.

I would argue that I had a better than average childhood with better than average parents. And despite their not seeming to support each other emotionally with complete success, they did support us—not perfectly, not entirely, but respectably. My parents were, like so many others are, I imagine, trying their best to do what they thought was right

for their kids, sometimes hitting the mark and sometimes not. I grew up feeling confident, smart, happy, healthy, and loved, from my alphabet blocks to my college applications, just as my liberal, freethinking, ex-hippie parents had hoped I would. I also grew up thinking for myself, believing in my ideals, and questioning everything that was presented to me, regardless of the source or the subject—including sex, though I don't ever remember any real discussion of the topic. It was the late '70s and early '80s, and no one I knew had parents who talked to them much about sex. We were exposed to it everywhere, but somehow no one seemed to know a damn thing about it.

I grew up Jewish, and my father was a rabbi. I don't remember my dad or the synagogue ever telling me where Judaism stood on sexuality issues. I do, however, remember being part of a national youth group that organized several retreats each year. Various families from the hosting congregations would put us up in their homes, and I was always amazed that they would allow boys and girls to sleep in the same room together. Although plenty of making out went on, the group dynamic seemed to keep things fairly innocent. There weren't any orgies or drinking fests, nothing like the parties students from my high school held when their parents were out of town, which often resulted in the neighbors' calling the police. Interesting what happens when you give people—yes, even teenagers—freedom, instead of attempting to control their every move.

So I didn't get much in the way of sex ed. *The Joy of Sex* was on the shelf in our family room, and I remember leafing through its pages when I was ten or eleven and being perplexed by how the mechanics worked, and why anyone would do such things. The line drawings seemed so foreign and exotic. But the book's frank descriptions, and its placement next to other titles like *Captain in a Day: How to Sail Your Own Boat* or *Macramé the Easy Way: Ten Steps to Creating Perfect Plant Hangers*, made me believe that sex was just another leisure activity—nothing to be embarrassed about, nothing to hide.

The only sex talks I got from my parents came too late—like the one during Thanksgiving my freshman year of college. I brought my boyfriend home with me, and as we waited for the train that would take us back to school, my mother asked me to take a walk with her, a request that was generally not a good sign. I have never seen a volcano erupt, but the way the words gushed from my mother's lips—with a ferocity I have never seen before or since—must have been akin to what the witnesses of Vesuvius experienced.

"I don't know if you're having sex or if you've ever had sex or if you're planning on having sex and I know I'm not the person you would talk to about it even though I wish I was and I don't know if you're being careful if you know what I mean by being careful of course you know what I mean by being careful you better know what I mean by being careful but people die from sex now and when I was

young you could get pregnant or need a shot of penicillin but not die and now you die but not always but you can and you're too young to have a baby and I want so much more for you and I know you want so much more for yourself and I don't know if you've had sex or are planning to have sex but I want you to be careful. . . . ”

“I lost my virginity to Kevin last spring, and I went on the pill immediately,” I finally interrupted. I was sure she would be very happy and proud.

“What?” she screeched. “Under my roof?” Thankfully, the train came not two minutes later, and she never, ever brought it up again.

The sex talk with my father happened that summer, when he picked me up from school to bring me back home.

“You're using condoms, right?” he said, apropos of absolutely nothing.

“Uh-huh,” I answered.

“Good. So, do you want to catch an Orioles game tomorrow night?”

The only other conversation my mom and I had had was when I'd gotten my period, but she'd said little more than that it meant I was growing up, and that it was a happy thing that I shouldn't be scared of or embarrassed about. I have pitiful memories of trying to teach myself how to use a tampon, waddling through my aunt's house like a penguin because I didn't quite understand how the damn things were supposed to work. As for sex, my friends talked about

“doing it,” but none of my close friends seemed clear on just what “it” was until high school—where the mixed messages became even more baffling.

I went to a Catholic high school. It was the best private school in the area, and my dad taught Judaism classes for the Jewish students. The nuns and priests preached abstinence before marriage, and advocated antihomosexuality. I remember Father Keith coming into the classroom one day to talk to us about the AIDS epidemic. It was 1986. “The good thing is, you kids have nothing to worry about because, of course, you are not involved in any sort of . . .” (here he lowered his voice and looked at us sternly) “. . . sexual behavior. It’s a gay disease, really; it’s God’s punishment for behavior that forsakes him and his great love for us.”

I was sixteen years old, and one of my best friends, Theo, was gay. My parents had never had any problem with homosexuality. They raised us to believe that everyone is equal, regardless of age or race or sex, and certainly regardless of whom they love. I was both appalled and indifferent. Father Keith’s comment struck me as awful, yet I wasn’t affected by it, either, mostly because I chose to ignore what he was saying. I had enough brains and experience at that point to know that he was off base, and that I didn’t agree with him, but not enough to take him on in front of my whole class.

Plenty of kids I knew were having sex in high school. And I wanted to. I didn’t know why; it just seemed—like

a lot of things—to be the thing to do. I just never had the opportunity. Although my best girlfriend, Janelle, was the head cheerleader and I could sit anywhere I wanted to in the cafeteria, I was never invited to any parties or asked out by any football players. The guys whom I imagined I would want to have sex with didn't even know I existed. I felt like I was waiting for the right person, right time, right something, but it wasn't quite clear what.

"You'll know," Janelle told me.

"How?"

"Trust me. You just will. You'll know he's really into you and won't fuck you over."

"That's what I'm looking for? Someone who won't fuck me over?"

"Well, that's not the only thing. You also want it to be someone you love and trust, and who loves and trusts you and all that. But you don't want to be the talk of the entire school the next day, do you?"

"I don't know. No," I managed, though it seemed as if I was the only girl at school who hadn't had sex yet.

"Yeah. Once you do it, that's fine. But you have to act like you haven't, and like you never would, because nice girls don't give it up until they're married."

"Oh," I said. I must have looked as confused as I sounded, because Janelle came over and started to French braid my hair—1984 girl-speak for *There, there, everything's going to be okay.*

“You have to be cool. That’s all. It’s cool to do it, but not for people to know. Except for the right people, and then they’re not supposed to know everything—otherwise, it’s not special.” I was glad she was sitting behind me, because I could not have hidden the look on my face for all the money in the world. If I had looked perplexed before, I can’t even imagine how mystified I must have seemed at that moment.

In a way, not much has changed for me this many years later. I feel equally baffled by contradictory signals and societal messages that make no sense whatsoever. Some things never change. But I did survive growing up, as most of us invariably do, despite all those puzzling notions about looks and love and sex and relationships. And, like so many other young girls, I thought I could and would eventually fall in love with a man who would fulfill every desire I’d ever had, and that I’d never want to be with anyone else. I thought we would live out the ideal I’d been raised to believe in. If people had told me back then that someday I’d be in an open marriage, and that I would be the one who had prompted it, I would have laughed in their faces. I had every irrational reason to believe, despite the fact that I was still a virgin, that my special someone—The One—was out there. All I had to do was wait, and someday my prince would come.