

CULTURE



I THOUGHT CASUAL SEX WOULD BE EMPOWERING, BUT IT WAS THE OPPOSITE

JENNIFER JOYNER · FEB 3, 2016

My experience persuaded me that marriage is the only context in which sex can truly be between equals.

When I was 17, a friend and I promised to lose our virginity within the year. We saw sex glamorized on TV and in music and heard popular peers talking about it as an amazing experience. The idea of the 21st century woman making her own sexual narrative sounded enticing. I wanted to be in control. The real clincher seems so cliché in retrospect: the women who had no-strings-attached sex enjoyed enviable celebrity among men. My friend and I didn't want to be left out.

I approached my sexual initiation with confidence. I believed *Sex in the City's* premise that uninhibited sexual expression was healthy and integral to female happiness—that women who avoided sexual opportunities somehow lacked the courage. A coward, I was not.

And so I lost my virginity to a stranger. I think I met the guy at a theme park, and I invited him to meet me at a club. But we didn't even make it inside—I wasn't interested in that. I wanted to get down to business. We had sex in the back of the car.

He was concerned and called the next day to see if I was okay. I didn't call back. I remember feeling smug about it, as if in successfully caring less than him I had somehow “won” the game. I proceeded to hook up with many more men in short order, chasing an illusive thrill.

But as it turns out, I was unprepared for the disparity between what I had imagined sex with a stranger would feel like and its reality.

By and large, it hurt—a lot. I mean *physically* hurt. Most of the guys couldn't tell the difference between moans of pleasure and groans of pain, or didn't care. At the time, I blamed myself—there must be something wrong with my inability to orgasm. I must be doing it wrong. When the pain was over, I often lied and claimed pleasure because I was ashamed of the truth. There were some gentler exceptions—strangers touching me tenderly to help me enjoy myself. But it felt weird and fake and, as much as I wanted to, I couldn't.

The monthly wait for my period felt even worse. It didn't matter if sex had been protected—I lived out those weeks in secret terror.

This sexual narrative was supposed to assert my autonomy, but I felt anything but empowered after a condom mishap. I was only 19—had I gotten pregnant, my entire life would have been narrowed to what I saw as two options: impoverishing and tremendously difficult single-motherhood, or kill what I knew to be my own child.

Neither choice at all easy or desirable, I felt trapped. Where was the freedom I was supposed to feel? This felt more like the freedom to self-destruct. Between such dread, confusion, and pain, hooking up had made my life hellish. By the time I got my period that month, my “experimenting” with casual sex was officially over.

A GAME THAT'S RIGGED

In a culture claiming to promote gender equality, I believe hooking up has taken a dramatic step in the wrong direction. Whether we like it or not, sex is intrinsically biased against the woman: biological reality dictates that she carries the brunt of sexual risks while he wields the majority of the of sexual power. Make their coital relations mutually selfish—that is, primarily about fleeting pleasures and not about caring for the person—and she always loses. She plays a rigged game.

What do I mean? Unlike men, women incur two huge sexual risks: 1) pregnancy, and 2) failure to enjoy. Of the two risks, we pretend that we've eradicated the first with birth control, but a closer examination of the facts [reveals](#) that about half of the abortions in America are the result of protected sex in which the birth control method failed—and about 3 in 10 women have abortions by their forties. Obviously, many women believe that protected sex won't get them pregnant—and are getting pregnant.

As for the second risk—that of women not exactly having fun in the sack—we are only starting to acknowledge it.

The perception that hookup sex is barrels of fun for women is everywhere; from ads to TV shows, from music videos to porn, we are sold scripts showing women embracing a hookup lifestyle with relish. I'll admit, I bought into it. But it has since dawned on me that my painful encounters with sex are actually common among women. Growing research evidence verifies that the [orgasm gap](#) between men and women exists—and is widest during hook ups. Widespread social evidence hints at this reality. Consider how we complain that women “always want to cuddle afterward.” I can't speak for all women, but needing to cuddle only happened to me when he left me aroused, unfinished, and frustrated. We say women's libidos are less urgent than men's, but I'd wager that if a man had to choose between painfully frustrating sex and chocolate, he'd choose chocolate, too.

It's common for people to claim, as [Hannah Rosen did](#) a couple of years ago in *The Atlantic*, that hooking up is a mutually beneficial opportunity to relieve one's own carnal appetite. It shouldn't surprise, then, that men in hookups care only about themselves; that's kind of the point. Yet those fighting for more female pleasure often cling to the unlikely position of justifying the hookup culture while blaming male ignorance of physical aspects of a woman's sexuality, the complexity of her anatomy, etc.—as if he didn't know how to try.

The reality is much simpler: According to the numbers, the best measure of a woman's sexual pleasure is his level of commitment to her. In a [study](#) involving 24,000 college students, 40 percent of women surveyed said they had an orgasm during their last hookup, while closer to 75 percent reported having an orgasm the last time they had sex in a committed relationship.

Despite this, it is precisely women providing men with uncommitted sex that our dating market relies on. According to the rules, he's supposed to dump her if she hasn't pleased him within [three dates](#). Many folks sign up, believing, as I had, that it's harmless fun. But we quickly learn otherwise. And often we're left with only a couple choices: either harden ourselves to cope or change our expectations.

When I hit my rock bottom was when I changed my expectations. Now, any man who would knowingly endanger the well-being of another person or his possible future child for the sake of his lust has, in my opinion, serious character flaws. Unfortunately, men fitting this description are often seen as the alpha males of our dating market. Not all are this callous, but their presence is felt. They humiliate other men for not chasing tail. They think it a game to break down women's sexual defenses. They treat women as disposable sexual commodities.

The truth is, had the men in my past been paying attention to me, they might have seen the agony in my eyes. But most of them hadn't. Their prior attentions had been mere ruses to obtain sexual release.

Thus, our modern dating paradigm of, “Let's have sex, baby, and something may eventually come of it,” ignores a very real truth: women cannot find worthwhile men this way. Good men are available, but not like this.

WHAT I REALLY WANTED

I was lucky I stopped before incurring any lasting damage. For years, I didn't know what to make of my experiences. The trauma of the memories frightened me. I eventually recognized that I had committed grave errors of judgement which had nearly cost me everything. Through the insight of having moved on, I began to see the hookup culture without the nightclub's optical illusions.

I no longer see the “fun” in casual sex. I practiced it enough to know that the risks are too high; the benefits so low. In what logical equation does gambling with my body, my future, my hopes and dreams, and the well-being of my future child ever make sense? Now in sex, I demand fair and reasonable risk management—which is why, since my pregnancy scare, only my husband, who cares about me and who’d willingly father my child, has qualified.

I’ve lost my hedonism too. Pursuing sexual pleasure without commitment no longer interests me. I’ve learned that sex, even at its height, merely echoes something far more worthwhile: a loving partnership of two people sharing everything.

What’s attractive to me today is the sort of romance that lasts a lifetime. Men who seek this know it requires patience, wisdom, and a firm grip on their own reins. Because he’s responsible, he restrains his sexuality until he’s ready to share her sexual risks—including that of parenthood; he’s not going to blow his chance of happily-ever-after on a woman he doesn’t trust. Until then, he’s researching the contours of her character rather than those of her anatomy; he’s focused on the long game.

This is why, contrary to popular belief, I’ve come to see matrimony as the only context in which men and women can overcome the inherent biological bias and share sex as equals. In legally binding himself to her welfare, future, and their children, he demonstratively shares his sexual power with her—the power to pleasure, the power to preemptively commit to the consequences of the act—and shoulder her sexual risks as his own.

I ended up marrying a very good man. A virgin, he gave me my first orgasm, first try. It has been through his love that I realized the trick to female sexuality—her pleasure relies much more on emotional trust than anything physical. Though physicality is certainly involved, great sex is about feeling so safe in his arms that I feel comfortable giving all of myself to him. It isn’t fleeting either; our passion matures and sweetens through the years according to the love it manifests. It may be a mystery, but I have found it to be true that when sex is the consummation of such covenantal virtues, mutual ecstasy flourishes naturally. I say this having tried it both ways.

I learned the hard way that our social theories on hooking up conceal many clauses and loopholes disadvantageous to women. She might buy into them and scour Tinder for hope, but I’m convinced she’s playing a game she cannot win. Eventually she will face the question I begged in my moment of truth: “Why are you doing this to yourself?” Good men are available for women who stand up for themselves. In the meantime, chocolate tastes way better.

Photo Credit: [Britt Rene Photography](#)