

I'm Having Sex and I Will Die:
Twelve Steps to (nearly) Overcoming Purity Trauma

1

I'm sixteen and touching myself. Not even skin to skin. Through pyjamas and cotton knickers. 'Masturbation', Mum says. 'All your problems come from that.' She must be right because our book *Questions Young People Ask, Answers That Work* argues that surely, it's an unclean habit, even though it's not mentioned in the Bible. Think consequences. Think how you're hurting Jehovah. It's mentally and emotionally defiling. It leads to fornication. 'Eww!' I write in my diary. 'How gross!' But still, I can make myself come through thick fabric. I lie on my back under my duvet, legs squeezed together, and use just one finger. Wipe my hand on the sheet because it's dirty. Listen, in case anyone can hear my silence.

2

I'm having sex and I will die. I'm trying hard to be a good Witness, I really am. I knew university would lead me astray, but I really like learning. And I'm trying so hard to be a good spiritual Sister in Paris on my student exchange, but his accent is to DIE FOR and he's played his guitar. Lying on his bed, him on top. He tastes of mint and Lipton tea. His stubble scratches my chin. My denim skirt isn't even off. Just pushed up around my waist. My knickers on one ankle. His jeans cast on the floor. Shirt open. He's really quite hairy. He turns over to open into his bedside drawer and fumbles with a wrapper. Outside, a police siren blares through Oberkampf. You're following your selfish desires. Think

consequences. Think Armageddon. Think the earth cracking open. Think... But I can't think. Part of me isn't even on the bed. She's a mannequin in the window. This is what Jehovah wills: that you don't follow your selfish desires, that you deaden your bodily members. But he's got it on at last. We smile and kiss. My arms wrap around his neck. I can feel him pressing against me. His hand goes down there to help. Harder. Harder. He can't seem to get 'it' in. 'Are you a virgin?' I shrug and laugh. Of course, not. He sighs and asks if I'm hungry. We eat chunks of baguette with Nutella. Later, he tries again. Part of me watches from the window while he can't get it in.

3

We have sex again and again and again. Each time there's blood on my thighs, on the sheet. Each time it rubs and stings. Each time it hurts like a hard ramming stick. But he's so gorgeous with his dark curly hair and scientific ideas. Am I bad for wanting a different life to the one in Manchester with three meetings per week and ministry on Saturdays? I want to live. Not only in the Paradise, but now. And living means saying yes. Living means moving with him and making noises like in films and gritting my teeth. Living means doing what he wants. He asks me what I want. I shrug, laugh. He cracks on with what he hopes I want. Fornicators will not inherit God's kingdom, will they? He rubs me too hard, but I don't want to make him feel bad, so I gasp like it's great. He enters me again and I smile and breath through the pain, through my selfish desires. Later, we lie there. It's late and he's asleep. He said he's falling for me, that he likes my open mind and spirit. I think we're falling in love. But there's a gnawing under my ribs. My eyes sting. Why can't I sleep? No one else is as moral as Witnesses, so no one gets what I'm going through. Only my

friend at school, who was Muslim. We got each other. But I will have to confess what I've done, what I'm doing, what I absolutely won't do again, to a group of Elders, to three men, all old and wearing dark suits. If I'm repentant, I won't be disfellowshipped. If I'm repentant, I won't lose my family. If I'm repentant, I won't die at Armageddon. Surely, sex is less sinful if you don't enjoy it.

4

I'm twenty-one and gulping red wine to get me in the mood. I've moved to Florence to be near my boyfriend, so come on, I mean, I should be happy, but why does my stomach feel hollow but full of stones? Finish the glass. Pour some more while he's in the bathroom. Nothing works like wine. The Duomo is at the end of via dei Servi, but my room smells of damp and pigeons. Mould sprouts on the wall. Being in that room where the three Elders, the three middle-aged men asked over and over, 'how many times, Sister, did you have sex?' has stripped me of my body. I can't eat. I take laxatives when I do eat. See only their faces when he's inside me. My hair is falling out. At least it doesn't hurt anymore. At least, I've worked out some things I like, only not how to say I want them. He comes back in and climbs on to the blow-up bed. It squeaks as he turns to me. We smile at each other. You brought this on yourself. You'd be happy if you obeyed Jehovah. I turn and check my phone, but she hasn't called. 'Switch it off,' he says. 'Don't let your mother run your life.' Sip more wine. 'I told you, I'll never be in that room again. I'm trying to make sure.' He sighs and says I don't have to do anything I don't want to do. He strokes my hair from my face. In my diary, I write, 'I don't think I want 'it' anymore. But I don't say anything. I can't move.'

I'm a twenty-three-year-old MA student and snogging an undergraduate in the student union. He's cute and two years younger than me. An ageing DJ plays eighties music. I ended things with my first boyfriend on the phone. Refused to see him. Said 'I need to be on my own.' Not the truth. Not even sure what the truth is. Only I can't anymore. I sway, drunkenly, to Kylie Minogue. At the bottom of my vodka and lemonade, I see everything clearly. I will never sleep with someone when I don't want to. In fact, I need to start again. Not have sex for a long time, not until I know I'm ready. Not for a religion or family. But for me. Over the music, I shout, 'I'm not sleeping with you!' 'What, what did you say?' 'I'm not sleeping with you!' My chest feels more expansive. 'Oh, sure,' he says. We dance over to my housemates. Later, we kiss again, like it's the school disco.

I'm at this guy's flat. He's beautiful and has an attractive swagger. He wants to become a director. He knows he will. I can pick up anyone I want, and I like the feeling this gives me. The tingling thrill on my skin. We're kissing and he's stroking my thigh. His hand edges to my thong. I push it away, playful. He walks me home in the early hours of the morning. He says, 'that was fun, but I'm not seeing you again. I want you to know that.' I blink, confused. I hadn't thought that far ahead. I close my porch door behind me and sink onto the step. The morning light is grey through the frosted glass. Some feeling of being put in my place. Like I had to be reminded of something. I start to cry. I don't know why. He's just a dickhead. But I can't stop. Gulping tears. Some kind of grief, but I don't know what for. For something that keeps getting lost. For my pitiful attempts. I cry for my first partner and his emails saying he's heartbroken and doesn't understand what's

happened, and I don't even answer them. I cry for the fact I can't even research my faith without panicking that I'm an apostate, without my brain shutting down. I cry for it all. I go into the kitchen, eat what I can find in the fridge and vomit it up again.

7

I'm twenty-four and on top. The guy I've been dating a few months beneath me. We're in my room in Manchester, my housemate singing along to Blondie in the shower. It's building in me. What a relief to find I can. Two ways now. I reach down and touch his face. He sucks my thumb. I come and then he does. We lie on the pillows. His eyes close. I just want to move forwards with my life, not think about what I believe or what I've been through. I reach over and take my morning citalopram. He asks why I even need those. My back goes straight and I swallow more water. My phone rings. He's muttering behind me, why do I always answer. We're in bed, for Christ's sake. 'Something might have happened,' I hiss. 'She's ill. I'm a carer!' I answer, 'Hi Mum!' Pulling on my dressing gown and padding into the hall. 'Aha, sure, yeah, I'll be over later. Do you want to go to the Trafford Centre?' I come back in, he's getting dressed, saying I have a problematic relationship with my family. Then, 'This isn't going anywhere, is it?' He might be a lecturer in classics and ancient philosophy, but he knows little about what people must do to survive. 'No,' I say. 'It's not.' I'm sore and it stings behind my eyes. Later, I help my mother put her shoes on. Fit her feet on the pedals of her wheelchair and something in me is healed.

8

I'm twenty-seven and having unprotected sex with a man who's always angry. It's early morning in a Soho hotel. 'You were funny,' he says, like he's proud of me. 'The whole hotel could hear you shouting while we were arguing.' He smiles and kisses my breast. He slips inside me and I'm wet and we come at the same time, easily, with no effort. Shocking, really, the disapproving voice in my head says because this is awful. But the cycle of arguments, really are my fault. He left his partner for me, and I won't even tell my family he exists. And yes, I left their religion, but that was a while ago – I'm using that as an excuse. All in angry texts but he won't answer my calls to explain. Nothing I say seems to help. There's always something I haven't thought of that hurts him. Now, he snuggles up to me, kissing my jaw. His sperm drips between my legs. 'I'll have to get the morning after pill,' I say. He pulls away and the air shifts. My chest clenches. Silence. When we get back to Manchester, he sends me texts, saying all he wants is for us to have a baby, he'd been hoping I'd get pregnant this morning. He needs children. He needs solidity. 'I can't believe you're having a mini-abortion.' I put the phone in my bag and take the pill anyway. I visit my mother and break down crying. 'It's a man, isn't it.' I shake my head, giving nothing. I don't go to Meetings now, but the prospect of that room and those men is always a shadow in my mind. 'Here,' she says, her voice kinder, more maternal than it's been in years. 'Have one of my Valium.' Soon the boyfriend who shouts leaves me for someone else. When he's with her, I have unprotected sex with him again.

I'm twenty-nine and having unsatisfactory sex with a barman in his single bed in Whalley Range. We snorted cocaine off the disabled toilet seat in a lock-in, while snow flickered on the window. A pang as I thought of my mother, of the many disabled toilets we've

squeezed in to together, of her radar key, of the smell of urine in a catheter. Your hair's still falling out, she says. Why don't you look after yourself? The bar guy and I went back to his house. I'm hoping for more cocaine, but there isn't any. He sleeps. I don't. My eyes sting, but I'm too lethargic to get up. In the morning, I walk home through thick snow, sickened with myself. This doesn't stop me sleeping with a journalist, an actor, another bar man, another bar man. Get a coil to keep me safe. Have guilty, shameful STD checks because I no longer bother to say use a condom. I wake up, not sure where I am. Lost my handbag. Lost my phone. Restarted my PhD three times. Quit it for months because the angry guy has broken me, though he says I was already broken, and he had no chance. Instead, I go to parties on a Friday and come home on a Monday, where time stretches into ribbons and I feel deep connections to people I've just met. Fuck that guy. Fuck everything. Dab or snort or swallow whatever. My veins ache with what I can't speak of. Only briefly, will the clench around my chest loosen. A handsome Scottish Tory tells me off for giving it up too soon. Fuck him, whatever. Still, I feel sick, ashamed. See another barman covered in tattoos who is gentle and only listens to the Beach Boys, then a musician, an ex-musician, a publicist. Sometimes for a night, a few weeks, sometimes on/off for months. Best to end things before they can. Scrape back some power. A threesome with a friend and her ex in a hotel. I'm on my period. This is it, I've broken all my taboos. Am I free now? But I'm too embarrassed, some deeper liquid shame. I want to watch, I say. So, I do. She's beautiful. I wonder what it would be like to be more into women.

I'm thirty-three. It's a damp Monday morning and I've done it again. Sleeping with someone and then regretting it. Met on OK Cupid. Our second date on Friday watching *The Sheep Dogs at Night and Day*. He was happy to go home, but some mischief took over, my old need to live in the moment. Come back to Chorlton, I said. There's late-night bars. Come back to mine, I said. There's wine in the fridge. Now it's raining and my flat is silent. For the next couple of weeks, he's busy, he says, fighting fascists. His organising job has long hours. Does it though? Really? Are there that many fascists in Manchester? Checking my phone over and over when I should be marking. Can't bear it anymore. Text him saying it's over. Phew. Breathe. I tell a friend I've bravely ended things again and she says, 'Why? I thought you said you liked him.' I have no answer. Am I the problem? Finally earning enough to pay for therapy. When I tell the counsellor I was brought up a Jehovah's Witness, he says, jokingly, 'you're going to need a lot of therapy!' I say I'll need a female therapist. My OK Cupid date and I bump into each other at a political event a month or so later. I have a new strategy. How about honest communication. How about taking things a bit more slowly. We do, and it works. Only half a lifetime to get here.

11

'What do you fantasise about?' My partner asks. 'Me?' Together for years now. 'Oh, you know,' I say. 'Stuff.' I close my eyes. I'm doing that thing again. Not being honest because there's something wrong with me. Something wrong with who I am, and I want to hide it. 'I don't. I make my mind blank,' I say. 'Or it's just blank.' We spend hours researching ethical feminist porn. Turns out I really like porn, even shit porn. I stop being so vanilla. I read novels where characters confidently have sex. I admire this younger generation of

writers, their lack of prudishness. How do they do it? It's lockdown and my mother is dying. All night, I turn her in her bed, so she doesn't get sores. I wash her vagina and this, this act, this one thing I can do for her, is beautiful. She still believes she's going to paradise without me. I calm myself with the Valium she left behind. Grief is ripping me open, but I start writing about the first time I had sex. Trying to capture what that was like. Words roll in my mouth. I want to spit them out. My stomach hurts with what might happen if those words are read. I end scenes coyly. Use flowery metaphors. Write my experience of sex like it's a romantic comedy. Press delete, delete, delete! Try again. I have sexual dreams, like I'm a teenager, of boyfriends from the past, of now. In the spaces between memory and dream, something shifts in me. I wake, horny and jump on my boyfriend. He says, 'this is unusual.'

12

I'm forty-something and wanking furiously. I pause to search in my bedside drawer. I've had a lot of sex, and I won't die. But my mother is dead and I'm alive with rage. There are words for what I went through. There are terms and diagnoses. There are theories and studies. Words like purity trauma, religious abuse, high-control groups, narcissistic abuse. There are words like freeze and fawn. Fight and flight. It wasn't just me. In the nineties, unmarried pregnant women in Ireland were still being abused in laundries. In the US, little girls were being pledging their purity to their fathers. In so many countries people are killed for being gay. Your sexuality is only a part of who you are, but if it's stamped on (I think of Orwell's boot coming down on a face), then it crushes all of you. There it is. My vibrator. I can write the words 'my vibrator' without a shiver of shame. No, that's not true. A bit of shame, but not enough to stop me writing it.