

Sex and the Soul of a Woman
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Chapter 1

A Rose Every Friday

Our society is filled with people for whom the sexual relationship is one where body meets body but where person fails to meet person. . . . The result is that [relationships] lead not to fulfillment but to a half-conscious sense of incompleteness, of inner loneliness, which is so much the sickness of our time.

Frederick Buechner

Carol gathers her clothes off the floor, tiptoeing silently around the bedroom in the early dawn, hoping not to wake this man. Snoring in quiet, even rhythm, it will be hours before he gets up. When he can, he likes to sleep until noon, and she has a ton of stuff to do today. Besides, it's easier to slip back into her place before her roommates awaken—fewer raised eyebrows and sly smiles to contend with that way.

Driving back to her apartment, Carol muses over how their relationship began. Who ever would have thought that cochairing a political committee would lead to this? They began as good friends, challenging each other's opinions with an occasional lighthearted jab. But one thing led to another, and after a few months, she began to stay over at his place. It made for less hassle. How or when or where the relationship turned sexual, she isn't sure. She just knows that she is starting to have feelings for this guy, and that this could be a problem.

There are no guarantees in relationships now. How many times have her friends drilled that into her? "You just have to go with the flow" is the mantra she hears. "Don't say much; don't ask for anything. Just play it cool and see where the relationship goes."

The problem is that Carol has already done this twice before.

Something cataclysmic is happening in the sexual lives of women today. A breathtaking amount of change in the way men and women relate to each other has taken place in one short generation. The great mating dance that was repeated for centuries has been shortened dramatically. A man and a woman fall into bed now with no promises made and no expectations to which they can hold each other. Love and romance take a backseat to the more immediate pleasures of sex, which, in its many forms, can be experienced with no immediately apparent effect

A man and a woman fall into bed now with no promises made and no expectations to which they can hold each other.

on the invisible world of soul and spirit. I doubt that even Aldous Huxley would recognize the brave new sexual world we inhabit.

As a counselor invited into the inner sanctum of one woman's life after another, I have the privilege of entering women's lives and hearing their stories. It is a unique perch from which to observe the monumental changes taking place. Women from every background—in college and in emerging careers—talk about the challenges they face in a world where the vintage road maps between men and women seem as though they were drawn in fading ink.

In many ways, of course, regardless of age or background, we all are telling the same story—of losses that are difficult to absorb, fears that keep us awake at night, and dreams that have

been incubating in us since we were quite small. But a new common denominator exists now—in the lives of younger women especially—a different narrative thread repeated in endless variation. Women’s lives are being shaped by a culture with a sexuality gone mad. Women are paying a tremendous price for the loosening of sexual boundaries—in broken hearts, in lost time, in confused sense of self. Perhaps these voices are recognizable:

- Shannon is desperate for something that will curb the panic attacks that descend on her unannounced. Her job as a news reporter is being threatened by these sweaty emotional monsters. Shannon has just broken up with a man named Ben—a great guy she met last year in college and followed to the city, where they both landed their first jobs. She feels bad about beginning to sleep with Ben a few years ago. It violated her convictions as a Christian, but she developed her own way of justifying their sexual relationship. At least it was better than so many women around her. This was no one-night fling—she and Ben were planning a future together.

Two things caught Shannon by surprise. She hadn’t anticipated that her growing attachment to Ben would be met with a reaction of his own—she was slowly caricatured as this woman “with too much of a hold on him.” The more attached she became, the more detached he got—until she finally wanted out altogether. And Shannon had no idea that leaving Ben after this investment of herself would feel like a miniature divorce.

- Donna says she has always been sexually curious. Movies she saw in middle school, stories of her older siblings’ late-night capers, and easy access to soft porn left her

primed for her own sexual adventures. When a boy showed interest in her, it was she who upped the ante, moving things to the next level of sexual intimacy. By the time she left high school, she had been with a good number of guys.

Now, in her second year of college, Donna finally has begun to wonder where her sexual activity is headed. *What is the point?* she asks. Why does she feel numb inside—as though her body is disconnected from the rest of her? Donna watches other couples and wonders if she will ever know what it feels like to have a man love her—just for her. A vague sense of regret and loss she cannot name follows her around. She longs to retrace her steps and find the innocence of soul she once knew.


- Emily's introduction to her own sexuality came from the most injurious of all possible routes. Her favorite brother used to slip into her room at night, just as she was turning twelve, where he held her in his arms and fondled her changing body. The bittersweet experience of hating yourself while you enjoyed intimacy never meant to be was profoundly ingrained in Emily's psyche. Being date-raped in high school just seemed like one more act in a bad play. With the sexual walls in her life broken down, Emily accepted the terms of the inevitable: a relationship with a man comes with a sexual price tag. Sex is part of the dues you pay to keep the relationship—and she has had quite a few of those. The fog and pain after each breakup leads to one poor choice in men after another.

Emily feels as though she steps in and out of two lives. On Sunday mornings she plays the flute in a worship


ensemble. She sincerely wants to follow God, but her sexual life feels out of her control. She can't reconcile her lifestyle with her beliefs about God.

In any direction you turn now, women feel not just the opportunity, but the pressure, to be sexual. I am sure the check-out lane in your grocery store looks just like mine. On any given day, I can reach for at least two magazines that will give me the latest tip on how to “do” a man—as though sex is assumed between two mature adults, as though it is a woman's job to provide the best experience possible, as though a woman should be able to shield her heart while she bares her body on cue. Although in the Christian community we subscribe to a different vision, we find ourselves swimming in the same cultural soup. We cannot help but be affected.

I hear similar stories in any part of the country. When I give a seminar to college women or single women in the marketplace almost anywhere, they say



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the same things. “I was swept into major sexual experiences early on, before I even knew what was happening.” Women often feel like they've sexually traded little bits of their soul they can't get back. “I was so afraid I'd lose this guy that I felt like I had to have sex with him.” It's hard to hold a line when a woman feels like a guy can get what he wants from three other women if she refuses.

Not every trend concerning women's sexuality has been negative, however. Some changes deserve a round of applause—the validation of a woman's experience of sexual pleasure, the

insistence that a woman's life is her own, given to her by God, and not defined solely by her attachment to a man. These truths are timeless. But the sexual revolution that my generation ushered through the door has taken us way beyond both—and far down a costly path.

“Revolutions” are supposed to usher in a braver, better world. Why, then, are women not happier than they seem to be?

This strange lack of happiness is being articulated now by a small cache of young female writers—savvy, intelligent, brutally honest women who wonder out loud why their peers, liberated from all the constraints of previous generations, do not seem to be prospering as expected. One particularly fresh voice with a daring message belongs to Wendy Shalit, an orthodox Jewish writer, who openly began to challenge the ease with which men and women get intimate. While a student at Williams College, she exposed the absurdity of men and women trying to share the same bathroom facilities, as though their physical differences could be neutralized. Soon after graduation she wrote the best-selling book *A Return to Modesty*, essentially pleading with other women to consider the physical and emotional cost of the loss of romance and courtship. She calls what is happening among younger women today “an invisible American tragedy.”² Her words are not too strong.

While there is indeed much promise in this generation of women, there is also an incredible amount of pain, especially pain that is rooted in mistaken sexual choices. The carnage of the sexual revolution blows into counseling offices like mine with great regularity—women who have so much going for them but who have sustained blows like one-night stands, abortions, and deep bonds with men they must find a way to dig out of the soil of their hearts.

Over and over I am struck with a desire to gather these women and bring them home with me. I want to pour them a cup of tea and invite them to talk. As a woman born in another era (when bell bottoms were popular the first time) and having slept with one and the same man for thirty years, I think this is a hard time to be female. It is true that nearly every conceivable door of opportunity is open to women now, but there is scarcely anyone standing in front of some of these doors and saying the obvious: *This path does not lead to a life you want.*

A Longing for Romance

In survey after survey, women insist that, while they value having more options in how they relate to men, they miss the sense of romance, of being pursued by a man. There seems to be a growing awareness that something beautiful between men and women is being trampled in the rush to the sexual. Some call it “lost civility.” The notion that a woman is a prize in her own right, worth crossing the dance floor of life to get to know deeply, is no longer assumed. Indeed, the “death of romance” we are experiencing now has become a universal moan among women.

In researching this book, I also interviewed women from earlier eras—ones who danced the night away to the music of a twenty-piece band or who kept love going in wartime through letters to a soldier half a world away. Their stories are almost lost to us now. Theirs was not an easy time, either, for they faced pressures of a different sort. Their options in life were notoriously limited. Becoming a wife and a mother was

There seems to be a growing awareness that something beautiful between men and women is being trampled in the rush to the sexual.

invariably the next step in a scripted life that presented far fewer choices.

Yet there was a beauty and an elegance to their relationships with men that one too rarely sees these days. Fraternities from the state university, for example, held their annual spring galas at the beach. Men in tuxedos and women in beautiful ball gowns really did dance the night away in a ballroom overlooking the sea—because both parties knew they would retire to separate quarters before the morning dawned. So much more was required of a man. He actually expected to have to court a woman's affection—sometimes riding the train for the day to see her for a few hours, expecting nothing more sexual than a kiss. When a man took a woman out, her care and her good time were his responsibility.

Perhaps the most engaging story that came my way, though, sheds some light on the respect and gentleness men and women tended to offer each other even if they never married. Charlotte, a lovely, silver-haired woman in her seventies, told me how she fell in love with a man she met on a slow boat to Europe while she was in college. They had hours to talk, watching the way the stars shine when there is only sky and sea. Frank continued to write after she returned home; he even came to see her once or twice. But she knew, as she had always known, that she would marry Joe, a man in her hometown whom she had dated for a couple of years. When Charlotte married a year later, out of kindness she sent Frank an invitation to the wedding. He replied with a gift—a leather-bound, early edition of John Milton's classic, his calling card tellingly stuck between the pages of *Paradise Lost*.

We can't turn back the clock, and our current problems would not evaporate even if we could. There are flies in the

ointment of love in every day and time. The chastity of women in days gone by was rarely a reflection of real virtue or the thoughtful consideration of sexual ethics. Good girls didn't have sex—it was about that simple. The fear of pregnancy kept many women chaste. Thus, they did not have to do the hard work that women do now of wrestling with the spiritual and emotional implications of joining one's body to another.

I share their stories as a way of gauging how far we have come in a relatively short span of time. “You've come a long way, baby” was the slogan that made Virginia Slims cigarettes famous. Indeed, we have come a long way. The question we must ask ourselves is, when it comes to relating to men, is this where we want to be?

In every generation, we must reach for truth that is timeless—that goes back further than any of us can remember. The only way to construct a life we can live inside is to build on something more solid than ourselves.

Opening Pandora's Box

The dance between men and women was carefully scripted until the late 1960s, when my generation discovered sex—as though it were some recent invention. I have friends who passed through college before sexual restraints broke loose, and their stories sound almost quaint by comparison. They speak of fraternity parties where men were required to appear in ties and dress shirts, weekday curfews of 10:00 p.m., and housemothers who ensured that no man ever saw more than the foyer of female living quarters. Two friends, Bill and Sis, dated for two years at the University of North Carolina amid ancient magnolias and tall stately columns that have served as the backdrop for

two hundred years of emerging romances. Every Friday Bill brought Sis a single red rose.

By the late 1960s, this picture was speeding past in the rearview mirror. While protesting the war in Vietnam and burning our bras, our generation also flung open the door of sexual restraint. It was as though we thought we had invented sex. C. S. Lewis once remarked that sex was such a sublime experience—who would ever guess it produced babies? For the first time in history, it didn't. A woman could take a pill, and her worries of getting pregnant were next to nil. The consequences of sleeping together did not arrive in nine months wrapped in a soft blanket, crying for his mama. Other consequences were present, of course—but they went underground, deep into the realm of soul and spirit, where the damage is much harder to calculate.

For as long as there had been wedding vows, sexual intimacy had been something set apart, sacramental, reserved for the realm of lifelong commitment between a man and a woman. Not so for my generation. Inside the room of the sexually initiated was where all the happy people lived—or so they said. And happiness was our big demand. We pushed until we cracked open a door bolted shut for good reason. Those who follow now rush headlong as though the door no longer exists. Inside this room there is pleasure, to be sure. But there is also a cache of sexually transmitted diseases and a truckload of heartache. The truth is that my generation owes the following generations an apology—a profound one.

People have been sleeping around, in and out of the wrong beds, since the dawn of time. The difference is that they knew to blush. When I pledged a college sorority in the 1960s, plenty

of girls slept around and no one would pretend otherwise. But that behavior was discreet and accompanied by guilt and shame. My daughter pledged the same sorority twenty-five years later. Her virginity was so distinctive that her sorority sisters nicknamed her “Mary,” as in the mother of Jesus. (She is blessed, thankfully, with a fairly thick skin.)

Campus life, almost anywhere now, has become a four-year immersion experience in every nuance of sexual freedom. A woman can’t act shocked when a man in a towel emerges from her roommate’s door—nor question why it might be a different guy than the one two weeks before. The stereotype of a well-adjusted coed is a woman who plays a sport, has a crack professional internship possibility, steers a campus committee, volunteers to mentor a homeless child—and enjoys an avid sexual experience with the men who come her way. It’s another “skill” she has acquired. That she would feel hurt or betrayed when a man moves on is a sign of weakness. This is the first cardinal rule: She is not supposed to *attach*.

I am sometimes asked, “Isn’t it different among Christians?” Thankfully, it often is. Christians decry the hook-up scene—impersonal sexual liaisons for recreation, the lack of inhibition aided by copious quantities of alcohol. That the rest of our culture has made sex about as casual as “two airplanes refueling”³ sometimes makes our sexual slipups appear less grievous by comparison. Christians, however, have a disturbing ability to compartmentalize our sexual lives from all that we know and believe about God, as though we’ve been left to construct our own sexual ethic.

Christian couples do insist on more commitment between them, but they are as tempted as anyone to satisfy each other

sexually by every manner short of actual intercourse. They feel more guilt, though, as they sense that sleeping together or oral sex or mutual masturbation cheapens all they hold dear.

The relationship scene on the far side of college has changed for everyone. Gone are the days when weddings followed close on the heels of graduation ceremonies. Marriage is being deferred en masse. Instead, a woman in the prime of her twenties, at the height of her sexual power, enjoys a seemingly endless supply of attention from single men. The less-told reality, however, is that men get scarcer in a woman's thirties. About the time she is really ready to settle down—when her biological beeper starts to go off—she begins to ask, “Where are the men?” Like trains rolling into the station of her life, a good one comes by less often. Men have the unfair advantage of always having an accessible supply of younger women to choose from.

Out of the Ashes . . . Hope


When I hear the stories that emerge from the sexual lives of women now and I sense the lack of self-respect, the blow to their dignity, the choices in men made out of a fog of pain and loss, a deep note of grief strikes within me. I find myself wanting to protest, “You are meant to be loved and valued and cherished for the rest of your life by a man whose face lights up when he sees you.” Whether a woman marries or not, strength and respect are her God-given birthright. I long to help women find the door back out of promiscuity and to recover the parts of their hearts and souls they feel they have lost. Doing so is entirely possible.

Considering what it has meant to grow up in a sexually charged culture with many of the natural barriers torn down, what kind of longings are stirred as you think about where you are


in your relationships with men and where you would like to be? Those longings are more important than most of us realize. The desire for romance and the beauty of a good relationship, for deep connections with people that last through thick and thin, is like a homing device that God installs in our hearts early on; and unless we have completely short-circuited, this is the very desire that will lead us home, in the most real sense of the word.

Some say that today's young women have given in to "pre-emptive despair." They think that caring too much and hoping too hard just sets you up for disappointment, so why bother? But I believe there is a world of untapped desire in women who have been trained to shrug off their feelings and cop an image of bored detachment. Some things just don't change. As the Roman poet Horace said, "You may drive out nature with a pitchfork, yet she will still hurry back."

The longings of a woman's heart will not stay beaten down into an androgynous mush to satisfy a slanted view of human nature. "The desire to be pursued and courted, to have sex with someone you love as opposed to just barely know, to be certain of a man's affection and loyalty—these are deep female cravings that did not vanish with the sexual revolution," writes Washington journalist Danielle Crittenden in her exposé of modern women's lives.⁴ Indeed, when you get down to brass tacks, most women long for one lasting love during their lifetimes. The reparation of broken relationships gets old before long, the glamour of male attention fades, and a woman starts to put her deeper longings into words:



*Most women long
for one lasting love
during their lifetimes.*



“I want a man to want me for me, and I want the security of knowing that we intend to build a life together.”

Even if a woman remains single, if she never marries, she must wrestle with the integrity of her own heart. Can she dole out little pieces of her self sexually and emerge as a whole woman with her self intact? What will she have in return other than perhaps a few good memories sprinkled throughout her mental scrapbook? Life in this sexualized society will not allow us to avoid the hard questions for long.

Our hair may be white and our face lined with wrinkles or we may be as young and fresh as Jennifer Aniston, with no makeup and hair tossed by last night’s pillow, but in the places in us that matter most, age really makes no difference. Women are primed for the kind of deep and lasting attachment that so marks our lives—as someone’s daughter, mother, aunt, sister, friend, or lover. An exciting career is just that—exciting. Excelling in a new sport is always a thrill. But what does any of it mean in the long run? Our lives are empty without relationships with those we love.

Fundamentally, it is this life of relationship that the sexual insanity of our day so threatens. Relationships, especially those between men and women, are inherently hard to sustain. They require every part of you—mind and body and soul—intact and capable of committing *your heart* into the safekeeping of another.

I invite you to explore the world of your sexuality in ways that perhaps you never have—to consider the power and beauty God pours out on you as a woman. Your sexual experience with men may be as pure as the driven snow. Or you may have known enough shame and heartache to fill a book. The

good news is that beneath the ashes of all our pasts lies a golden core—the intrinsic, transcendent reality of being created in the very image of God as a woman. We cannot re-create our grandmother’s day—and we need not. But if we listen to the longings of the heart God gave us, we will find our way home.

— *Sexuality and Your Soul* —

1. When do you feel not just the opportunity but the pressure to be sexual with a man? How do you feel about this?
2. What would more romance in a relationship look like from your perspective?
3. When do you encounter a sense of “preemptive despair,” the notion that hoping for much of anything in a relationship is just a setup for disappointment? What effect does the refusal to hope have on relationships? On life as a whole?
4. If a woman remains single, yet moves from one sexual relationship to another, what will be the impact on her?
5. In terms of a “deep and lasting attachment” to a man, what qualities are you looking for in him? In the relationship itself?