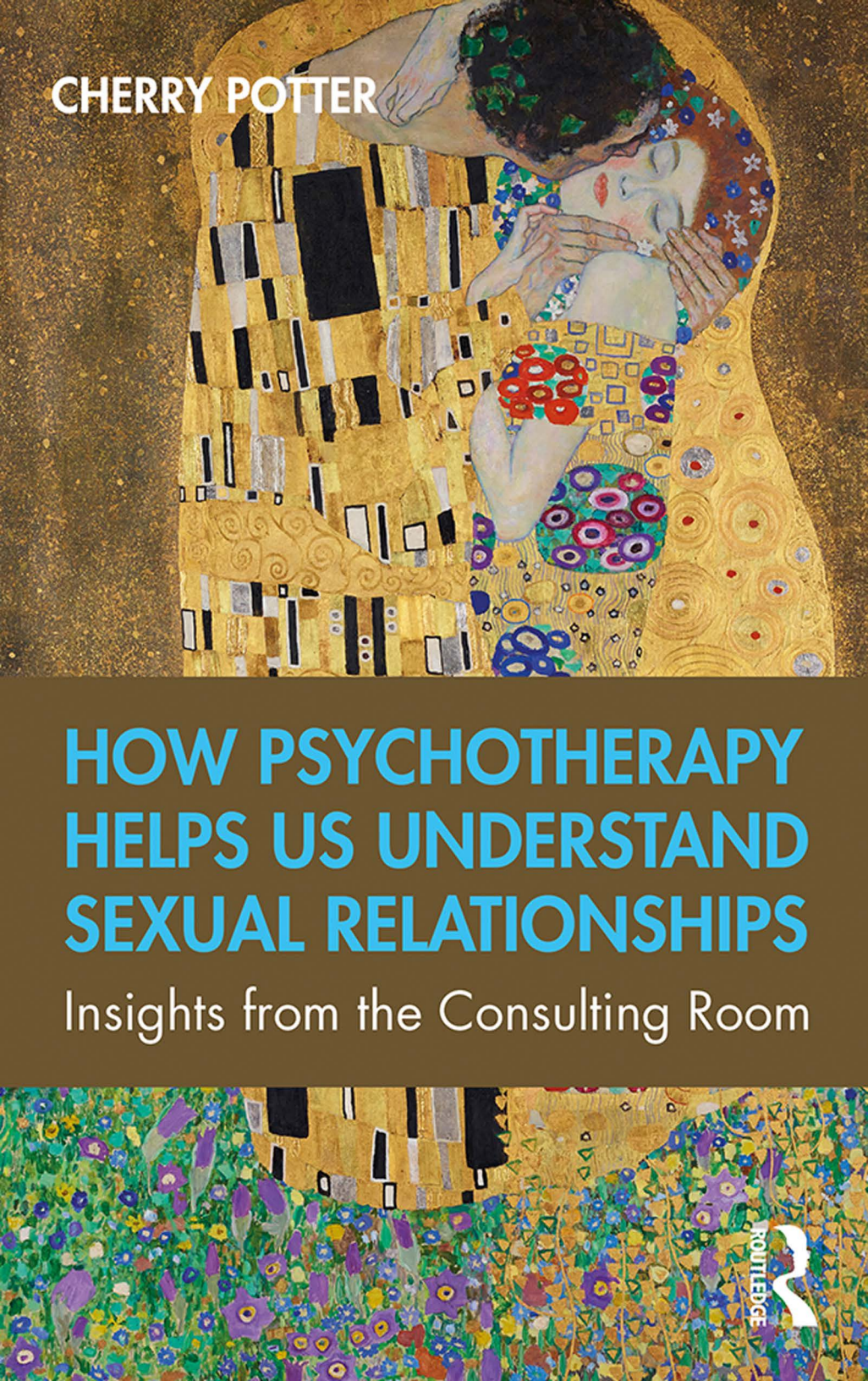


The background of the book cover is a reproduction of Gustav Klimt's painting 'The Kiss'. It depicts a man and a woman in an embrace, surrounded by a golden, patterned background. The man is wearing a robe with black and white geometric patterns, and the woman is wearing a robe with colorful floral and circular patterns. They are both looking at each other with affection. The overall style is characteristic of the Vienna Secession movement.

CHERRY POTTER

HOW PSYCHOTHERAPY HELPS US UNDERSTAND SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

Insights from the Consulting Room

ROUTLEDGE



How Psychotherapy Helps Us Understand Sexual Relationships

In this fascinating book, Cherry Potter takes readers on her personal and professional quest for insights into sex, relationships and gender differences. Why do we feel what we feel, and do what we do? What is the impact of 'performance anxiety' on men, and on society generally? Why are women still faking it? Is ubiquitous online porn turning the clock backwards?

The book delves into the work of Freud, Klein, Bowlby and recent developments in attachment theory for insights into our conscious and unconscious fears and desires, and introduces readers to a range of fascinating clients. These include Jeremy, who was so ashamed of his virginity he was unable to have a relationship; Ellie, who repeatedly fell in love with unobtainable men; Kieran, whose fear of abandonment threatened to wreck his gay relationships; Dulcie, who for years had been unable to face the truth that her husband was having multiple affairs; and Lars, who was addicted to online porn and prostitutes. The book shows how the work between therapist and client is a process of learning together, which is at times painful and deeply moving, but can also reflect a renewed vitality and hope for the future, particularly when it comes to talking about sex.

How Psychotherapy Helps Us Understand Sexual Relationships: Insights from the Consulting Room will be of great interest to both the general reader as well as psychotherapists and counsellors.

Cherry Potter is a UKCP-registered psychotherapist, group analyst and couple therapist. She was formerly a writer and film school lecturer, and she has run screenwriting workshops in many countries. She has published three books and many articles about film, culture and relationships. She sees clients at her private practice in Brighton.

“What strikes me is Cherry Potter’s openness, how engaging her book is and how much I identify with it. I’ve no doubt this will be a great book for therapists as well as for people struggling to understand their own sexuality. But I suspect its real value will be for encouraging people to be as honest with themselves as Cherry Potter has been.”

Philippa Perry, Psychotherapist, Author, Presenter of
Sex Lies and Lovebites: The Agony Aunt Story
(BBC Four), *The Great British Sex Survey*
(Channel 4) and others

“Her writing style is accessible and her knowledge of psychoanalytic theory obvious. I recommend it widely.”

Paula Hall, UKCP Accredited Sexual and Relationship
Psychotherapist, Founder and Clinical Director of
the Laurel Centre, Author, *Sex Addiction: A Guide
for Couples and Those Who Help Them*

How Psychotherapy Helps Us Understand Sexual Relationships

Insights from the Consulting Room

Cherry Potter

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For Brian and Danielle and in memory of Stephen

We never have so little protection against suffering as when we are in love; we are never so desolate as when we have lost the object of our love or its love for us.

—Sigmund Freud (1930)

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Preface

It's hard to talk about our own sexual relationships, even in the confidential space of a psychotherapist's consulting room, without omissions, half-truths and lies, even lies to ourselves. How can we be honest in a world where we are all supposed to be sexually and emotionally savvy without the fear of being judged, found inferior or lacking in some way? As a psychotherapist, naturally, I believe that talking is the best way to understand our deepest feelings, however irrational and seemingly full of contradictions. I also know that many of us find talking honestly about our behaviour in our intimate relationships, and particularly our sexual feelings, fraught with embarrassment and even guilt and shame. But for many clients, even if they come for help because they are suffering from anxiety or depression, talking about relationships, including their sexual relationships or lack of sexual relationships, often turns out to be an important part of their therapy. The work of psychotherapy is rarely easy. Yet one of the most heartening things I have learnt is that after we have bitten the bullet and discovered that we can talk about what needs to be talked about, there is a palpable sense of relief and a renewed vitality and optimism for the future.

My aim with this book is to share my attempts to understand some of the complexity of our sexual feelings and the kinds of problems that frequently arise in our sexual relationships. I also love stories. I spent many years as a writer and teacher of film and creative writing before I trained as a psychotherapist. I know how beneficial other people's stories are as a way of helping us to understand our own experiences, feelings and the many dilemmas we face in life. I have included a few stories that illustrate things

I have learned from my own life. But the most important stories in this book are the case studies based on my work with clients in my consulting room. These stories show how my clients and I, together, have tried to understand what's going on in their relationships. How we have tracked back into their past relationships and childhood experiences. How we discovered repeating patterns, compulsive destructive and self-destructive behaviours, and complicated defence systems that may have once served to keep them safe but are now long past their use by date. The stories show how we celebrated moments of insight together, and how we confronted difficult conversations about what it might mean to change. But of course, change has already started; understanding ourselves better is change, letting feelings out is change, for some people discovering that it is possible to trust the intimacy of a relationship, even if that intimacy is a conversation with a psychotherapist, is change.

I have delved into the ideas and research of various psychoanalysts, sexologists, psychologists and sociologists which have helped me to understand some of the complexity of what goes on in our sexual relationships. I have done my best to write about the psychoanalytic ideas in a way that makes them interesting, relevant and accessible.

I don't promise to provide answers to the many questions raised in this book. It is up to each of us to make our own decisions about how we live our lives. My aim is to pass on what I have learnt to readers, to offer ways of thinking and talking about the many dilemmas and choices we all face in our sexual relationships, and hopefully to enable readers to feel less alone with a subject that is all about intimacy and yet, notoriously, leaves many of us feeling isolated and alone.

This book is for professional and training psychotherapists and counsellors who, like me, are interested in sexual relationships. It is also for general readers who are struggling with problems in their sexual relationships. It is about both sexes, for both sexes. I passionately believe women's and men's sexual and relationship liberation depends on both genders, straight or gay, joining the conversation.

Given the confidential and sensitive nature of this topic, I am hugely grateful to my ex-clients who, because they recognised how a book about psychotherapy and sexual relationships might help others with similar problems to theirs, have given me permission to share the stories of the work we did together. They have also advised me about an effective identity disguise, and in some cases contributed valuable insights into the pieces I have written about their therapy. However, there are two exceptions. In Chapter 5 I have written about a woman's group I conducted so long ago that I was unable to track down all the group members. The client I have called Denise is a fictional portrait based on my experience as a group therapist with similar clients. In Chapter 9, the material is particularly sensitive and the clients whose stories I have referred to are fictional representations based on my experience with clients who have suffered from abusive relationships.

I It all begins in childhood

All sexual relationship stories begin when we begin, in childhood.

Just one sentence in and already I need to pause and take a deep breath. The subject of childhood sexual feelings often arouses deep anxiety, suspicion and even hostility – particularly in an era when we are beset by a seemingly endless flow of headlines about childhood sexual abuse. But talking about childhood sexuality is essential if we are to understand our adult sexual relationships.

One of the biggest controversies surrounding Freud was, and still is, the importance he placed on sex and childhood sexual development in his attempt to understand the human condition. He was aware of the wish to cling on to the fantasy of childhood as a sex-free zone. Nevertheless, his determination to understand the kind of normal neuroses that afflict us all, as well as the more extreme neuroses, inevitably led him into the territory of childhood sexuality.

Alfred Kinsey, the American sexologist, famously hated Freud and anything to do with psychoanalysis. Yet even he reluctantly conceded that sexual development in childhood is 'a prime source of adult patterns of sexual behaviour and of many of the characteristics of the total personality' (Kinsey 1948). He arrived at this conclusion as a result of the huge amount of data he collected in his sexual history questionnaires; by 1948 more than 18,000 men and women had divulged their most intimate sexual secrets. Kinsey and his team of researchers couldn't help noticing connections between the men's and women's accounts of their childhood sexual experiences and their behaviour as adults.

In my work as a psychotherapist, I am often reminded of how feelings we experienced long ago as children worm their way into

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our intimate adult relationships. The moments in therapy sessions when we become aware of these connections are often deeply moving; something important has risen to the surface. There are many examples of this in my clients' stories which I shall write about later. But first I want to begin with a few stories from my own childhood in the 1950s and 1960s.

My universe back then was a small village in the countryside. This was long before the Internet or mobile phones. Nevertheless, I believe the sheer complexity of what one child, me, went through when I was trying to understand my body, my sexual feelings, my gender and the attitudes of others around me will still resonate. Some aspects of childhood never change.

Some reflections on my childhood anxieties about sex

I remember being aware of sexual feelings in my body when I was very small. My earliest memory is when I was four years old. It is early morning. I am alone in our sitting room that overlooked the village street. My father has left early to catch the bus to the secondary school where he teaches. I am watching my sister, who is three years older than me, greeting her best friend in the street outside and the two of them setting off together on the half-mile walk to the village primary school. I am envious; I desperately want to go to school but I am still too young. I can hear my mother in the kitchen washing up the breakfast things. She thinks I am getting dressed, but my clothes are still in a heap on the chair where she left them. Instead I crouch in front of the electric fire, enjoying feeling the warmth and touching my naked body. I'm alert, listening, in case my mother should come in. It's important that she doesn't see what I am doing.

Thinking about this memory now, I'm puzzled. Why was I so sure that the pleasure I gained from my own body should remain a secret? I don't remember my mother ever reprimanding me for touching myself. At the time I thought this was because she didn't know. At that age I don't remember being worried about what I was doing, just knowing I must be vigilant. My sexual anxiety set in when I was a few years older.

My sister liked playing with dolls and helping our mother, who had suffered from depression on and off since I was born. I felt closer to our father. I was a curious, talkative child and he was always ready to answer my many questions about the world. I was also a tomboy and happiest when I was playing in the nearby woods with the small gang of village children, mostly boys. We built secret camps out of branches and leaves, and one of our favourite games was 'I'll show you mine if you show me yours'. I remember asking my father what the boys' 'thing' was called, and the pride I felt when he told me it was called a penis. I was impressed: the penis was visible, and it also had a name. I also wanted to know why boys had a penis and girls didn't. But I don't remember asking him that. Instead I was left with the troubling thought that being a girl meant I had an absence; being a girl meant I lacked a penis. Yet I felt deep sensations of pleasure that led to a moment of intense satisfaction when I touched myself in a specific place where a penis should be. I was puzzled. But why didn't I ask my parents for an explanation? Why was it that I seemed to know that I should keep this mystery about my body secret?

A momentous event happened when I was seven. My brother was born. He not only displaced me as the youngest member of our family, but he was also a real boy. Had I really been meant to be a boy, but because of secretly touching myself I had inadvertently rubbed my penis away? I didn't know the word for masturbation.

As I write about this, I can almost hear Freud whispering 'penis-envy' in my ear. In a way, he would have been right. I do remember envying boys their penises. But my penis-envy was at least partly due to my ignorance. I was a little girl struggling to make sense of my body, my gender and my sexual sensations at a time when the mysterious private parts between a girl's legs were taboo. Because girls at that time were not told the words for clitoris, labia and vagina; we did not know they existed. But we knew the word for penis, or 'willy' as it was more often called. In the absence of any language to describe the sexual parts of my body or my sexual sensations, I lacked any information to help me understand my own body and reassure me that I was normal. Whilst, somehow, I had learnt that it was normal for boys to play with their penis

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even if it was bad, I had become anxious and afraid that I was the only little girl in the world who touched herself in this way.

There was only one way, I thought, to find out. One day as we were walking home from school, I asked my best friend. Rosemary ran off laughing, leaving me alone and acutely embarrassed and ashamed. This was something little girls were not supposed to do. I was abnormal. Not long after this, I went to Rosemary's house to ask if she could come out to play. Her mother opened the door and told me sternly that she wanted a word with me. She took me into her scrupulously tidy sitting room and made me stand to attention in front of her. I was frightened; she was enormous, and I was transfixed by the rolls of flesh bulging around her neck. I fidgeted uncomfortably as she informed me that I was a rude, disgusting, dirty little girl and her daughter was not allowed to play with me anymore. I remember running out of the room in tears, my face burning with shame. I couldn't believe Rosemary had told her my secret. Village children knew what not to tell grown-ups.

But still, I didn't ask my father or any grown-up for reassurance. Instead I tried to resolve my anxiety by issuing myself dire threats about all the terrible things that would befall me if I ever touched myself there again. One of the threats was that I would go blind. But why should I think that I would go blind? I have no memory of anyone telling me this. Maybe I picked up the idea from the village boys. It was common at that time for boys to be told they would go blind if they played with their willy. There was no need to threaten girls because we didn't have a penis, therefore we didn't masturbate.

It was many years before I learnt that the pleasure I experienced was because I was touching my clitoris. In the absence of knowing that I even had a clitoris, I remained convinced that I was the only little girl in the world who did what I did; there was something wrong with me. However, despite my increasingly dire threats of self-punishment, including threatening to kill myself if I didn't stop, I failed miserably.

Another time, I was playing in the woods with a boy who was a few years older than me. After we had finished building a camp or

damming up a stream or whatever we were playing, he suggested that we should both take off all our clothes, I was to lie down flat on my back and he would lay down on top of me. We lay there for maybe a few seconds, neither of us moved, he stood up and we put our clothes back on. He solemnly informed me that we were to do this every day if we were to get married. We never did it again.

I don't recall feeling anything particularly sexual when this boy lay on top of me. The boy didn't have an erection – not that I knew what an erection was when I was seven. I would guess that he may have seen some grown-ups having sex and our re-enactment through sex play was his attempt to understand what they were doing. I don't believe his actions were sexual molestation. But it is interesting that I still remember the incident after all these years. I suspect it stuck in my memory because I believed what we were doing was rude.

Looking back, I can see how my parents may have prided themselves on being freethinking, liberal-minded people who believed children should be free to roam the countryside without supervision. But they were also subject to the inhibitions they had learnt in their own childhoods. I never saw them naked. They slept together in a double bed, but I was completely unaware they did anything other than kiss and cuddle. If the subject of sex ever came up, and I don't recall that it ever did, I imagine it would have caused awkwardness and avoidance. I recall feeling curious and acutely uncomfortable when I saw my little brother playing with his penis, but my parents ignored it. If they knew their younger daughter masturbated, they never mentioned it.

Their silence left a vacuum which I filled with whatever I could glean from other children. The association between sex, sin, rude, dirty and bad was firmly planted in the minds of all the children I knew. We all knew that anything to do with sex was rude and forbidden, which meant that the games we played in secret in the woods were even more daring and exciting. The effect of this was that, even at a very young age, I was beginning to develop a keen sense of the curiosity and excitement associated with the secret and the forbidden.

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My village is just one small example of what I think has the most significant impact on us throughout our sexual lives – our culture and our community's attitudes towards sex.

What Freud and Kinsey told us about childhood sexuality

As early as 1905, Freud published his views on childhood sexuality. He knew sexual life did not begin at puberty (as most people pretended to believe, probably choosing to ignore the fact that, like me, they could remember all sorts of sexual sensations and adventures long before puberty) but soon after birth. Kinsey also realised from his research that 'erections may occur immediately after birth and, as many observant mothers (and a few scientists know), it is practically a daily matter for all small boys, from the earliest infancy and up in age' (Kinsey 1948).

Both Freud and Kinsey talked about how masturbation and sex play is normal for both boys and girls from two years old or younger, and that there is very little difference between a little boy playing with his penis and a little girl playing with her clitoris apart from size. Small children also enjoy showing off their genitals and exploring other children's genitals – hence the game we played as children: 'You show me yours and I'll show you mine'.

Kinsey interviewed a range of pre-adolescent boys who disclosed an extraordinary array of sexual stimuli that had given them erections, such as sitting on warm sand, sitting in church, fast bicycle rides and fast elevator rides, being scared, fear of punishment, being yelled at, urinating, seeing females or sex pictures, viewing yourself nude in the mirror. One of my clients vividly recalled the sexual thrill when he glimpsed the tops of his mother's stockings when he was about six years old. Another told me how he had come across his mother's silk panties on the floor of his parents' bedroom when he was six. He had felt a thrill of excitement. He secretly undressed, pulled on her panties and climbed onto a chair to view himself in her dressing table mirror.

Freud would not have been surprised by these accounts of what excited young boys. He had noticed how the rhythmic

movement of trains was sexually stimulating to boys, and he even speculated about whether this was why so many boys said they wanted to be train drivers when they grew up. He also noticed how some strong emotions, including unpleasant ones such as intense apprehension, fear of punishment, or actual punishment can cause young boys to want to touch their genitals and to experience a sensation that Freud rather quaintly described as like 'a nocturnal emission with all its bewildering consequences' (1905). He became interested in how the sexually exciting effect of emotions that are in themselves unpleasant, such as fear, horror, or punishment, persists in some people throughout their adult lives, and he went on to make a connection with sadomasochism. And of course, his interest in childhood sexual fantasies that feature our opposite sex parent became central to his formulation of the famous Oedipus complex (more about Oedipus later).

The psychoanalyst Melanie Klein devoted much of her life to working with infants and young children. She agreed with Freud that children's early sexual experiences were normal and very important to their development. She also noted that young children's sexual relations with each other include 'looking, touching, performing excretion in common' (Klein 1928).

Children's sex play is normal; it is part of their other play and it wouldn't be problem for children if it wasn't for the disturbing, sometimes frightening and often bewilderingly contradictory messages they pick up about sex from the world of older children and grown-ups. In recent years, children also must contend with information and misinformation about sex they find in Internet searches and the deluge of disturbing sexual images on social media and Internet pornography.

The response of some adults when they see a child masturbating, showing off their genitals or engaging in any kind of sexual activity can be extreme. They become agitated, disturbed and even enraged; they demand that the child stops fiddling with themselves and slap the child to make it stop. One famous story from Freud is the case of Little Hans, aged three, whose mother threatened him that if he didn't stop playing with his 'widdler' (his name for his penis), she would send him to the doctor to have it cut off (Freud 1909).

8 *It all begins in childhood*

Some adults, mothers, fathers, older siblings or whoever is caring for the child, have an opposite reaction; they lose all sense of boundaries and become narcissistically involved in the child's sexual activities, persuading themselves that they are only playing with the child when in fact they are stimulating themselves by engaging with the child's sex play. And some grown-ups or older children ignore the child's boundaries and autonomy completely. Many people never recover from the trauma of the sexual things done to them as children. In short, all children learn very early in their lives that society is awash with bewildering mixed messages, ranging from fascination to disgust, when it comes to anything to do with sex.

My world as a teenage girl becomes more sexually confusing

I went to the girls' grammar school in the local town when I was 11. I was still trying to work out exactly what sexual intercourse entailed. One day a girl in my form explained to me that the man must lay on top of the naked girl and put his thing inside her. But beware! Her mother had warned her that if a man saw you naked, sunbathing on a secluded beach for instance, the man would turn wild. Like a wild animal, he would have to have sexual intercourse with you because he wouldn't be able to control himself. Men were like this. This is why you must never let a man see you naked unless you are married.

I didn't believe her mother's story about men turning into wild animals. But it was around this time that I was seized by a new anxiety. I became afraid to go to sleep at night in case I died. I was so anxious about dying that I thought I was ill, although the doctor couldn't find anything wrong with me. It didn't occur to me to tell my parents that I was afraid of dying. Instead one night I found a solution on my own. I took a torch, pencils and a sheet of drawing paper to bed, and under the sheets I shakily drew a picture of a naked woman with a naked man lying on top of her. The image of the man was levitating just above her with his erect penis jutting down to touch her pubic area. When I finished the drawing, I felt a surge of relief. Now I had experienced sexual intercourse, the

most important thing in a woman's life, I remember thinking, now it would be alright if I died. I climbed out of bed, hid the drawing and went to sleep. The next day I made a miraculous recovery and returned to school.

Looking back, I can see that in my child's mind I was struggling to conquer my anxiety about two of the most important things in life: sex and death. Not only were the two in some way connected in my child's mind, but relieving my anxiety about sex helped me overcome my fear of death.

For the next few years, the main topic of conversation in the school breaks was the boys who went to the nearby boys' school, and what girls had to do to attract boys. Nice girls were meant to be pretty and passive. Girls who were bold, flirtatious or sexually active were called 'slags'. Sex for a nice girl was okay above the waist but not below, and satisfying the boy's sexual needs was of primary importance so long as you resisted his inevitable attempts to 'go all the way'. The subject of satisfying our own sexual needs, apart from kissing, was hardly mentioned. As girls, we were supposed to gain all the satisfaction we needed through our power to attract the most beautiful boy and show him off as our boyfriend.

As I became increasingly obsessed with my appearance and boys, my previously close relationship with my father changed. I was desperate for his reassurance that I was attractive and pretty. But he appeared to lose interest in me and stubbornly ignored my many ploys to get his attention. I now suspect that, like many fathers of teenage girls, he was disturbed by his own feelings in response to his daughter's burgeoning sexuality. Rather than risk responding inappropriately, he shut me out. I would have to look elsewhere for my reassurance.

I left home at 17 and went to art school. It wasn't long before I became embroiled in a secret love affair with a married lecturer twice my age. Heartbroken and guilt-ridden, I fled to London to a new art school and a new era. The London art schools in the late 1960s were hotbeds of free sex and revolutionary politics. The boys planned the revolution; our role as girls was to look pretty in our white lipstick and Mary Quant miniskirts and service