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The sexual revolution and the young—

By Thomas J. Cottle

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The gradual liberalizing of sexual codes, ethics and standards of appropriate behavior – what some have called the “new morality” or the “sexual revolution” – has, to many observers, transformed young people into wholly promiscuous adolescents. Too often overlooked, however, are those young persons for whom the new morality causes a special sort of insecurity and hurt.

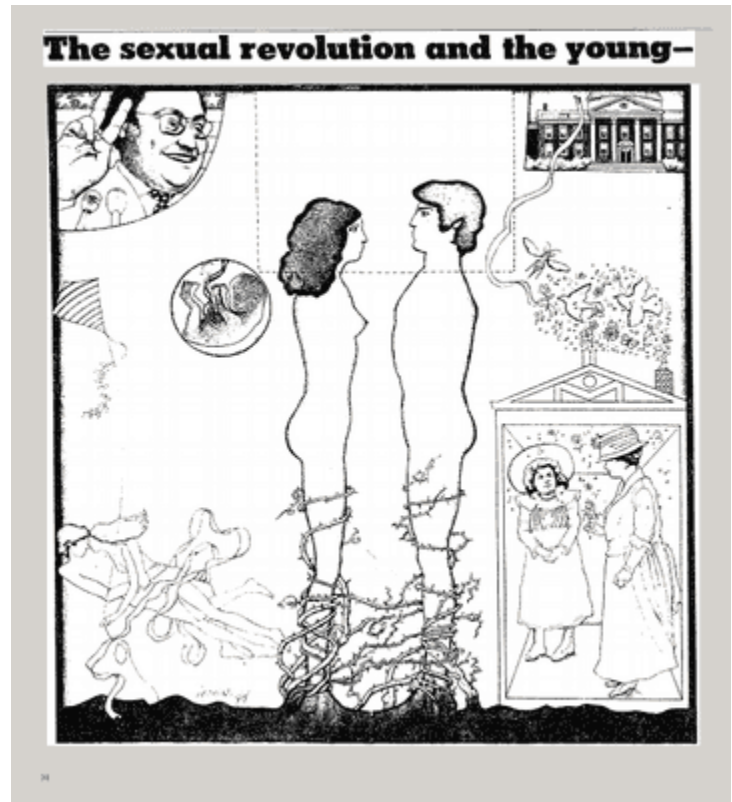
For some time my work in sociology has been to describe the experiences of young people, many of whom I have visited with regularly for more than five years. Recently several young people have spoken to me of those features of the new morality that have hurt them, or confused them, or some way disrupted their sense of intimacy and personal evolution. Insisting that they speak only for themselves and to circumstances they call their own, they have granted me permission to publish their words.

On a fiercely cold March day I was visited by a 17-year-old college freshman. Her face appeared to be frozen, her fingers practically rigid. We had spoken before, though not that many times, but these had essentially been interviews about her college experiences. These meetings were usually at her residence house; she had never before visited my office.

“I wanted to see you,” she began, laughing weakly, “because I can't study.”

“Anxious?”

“Yes, in a way. But not like you must think. See, I live with this girl, who, well, she has this boyfriend who's always in our room. And like, I like him and all that, but it's kind of hard to work while they're making love all the time. It's all right when the library's open, but like, some nights I get back after studying and I can hear everything they're doing, or Judy will put a note on the door for me or



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something. Two nights ago I studied for three hours in the bathroom, if you can believe that. On this freezing cold floor. I had to use the shower curtain as a blanket. I mean, maybe I'm crazy, but I don't think it's fair. They don't seem to mind. It's like they really wouldn't care if I went to sleep but I just can't see doing that. I mean, can you?"

"No, I don't think so." I recalled what were for my generation the problems of roommates and their "dates."

"I've thought of asking for a single, but a lot of things prevent that."

"Like money?"

"That's one thing. But there are others." She seemed perplexed, or rather it was a request for permission to say something that I saw on her face "If I live alone, don't you see, there will be lots of people who'll think it's only for sexual reasons."

I was incredulous. Single rooms belonged to the brains when I went to college—or to neurotics, maybe, but scholarly ones who kept strange hours, and just learned more.

"Of course. Don't you know? Who would want live alone but a sex maniac, or someone frightened of it." Then suddenly she was crying, embarrassed that she was, and pulling a handkerchief out of the pocket of her pea jacket. "I want so much to be like them, but I can't get myself to. There are so many different values everywhere. Between my parents and the kids and my sister, and Judy. ... I used to be like them. I mean, I'm not against sex. You can sense that, can't you?" I nodded yes. "But what am I supposed to do? Who do I tell? Where do I go? I want to be like Judy, but how can I?"

"Why can't you do things like her if you want?"

"Because I'm **UGLY DAMMIT**," she cried out. "Because I have no choice. What am I supposed to do, go to bed with the first guy that comes along? Don't you see how complicated this is? Nobody knows anymore what anybody is doing. I don't know what normal means. One minute I think I'm O.K., and then I think I should see a doctor. I just don't know," she sobbed. "I feel so lonely all the time, and I can't even figure out if that is supposed to be good or bad. One person says aloneness is right, somebody else says I should find someone to sleep with. I don't know, I don't know." I did my best to comfort her. Finally she was willing take off her coat and scarf. She sensed my embarrassment.

"Do you know what I did this morning?" she asked without looking up. "I went to the health services and had myself fitted for a diaphragm. I had to. It's like inside, in my body, I had to feel that in some way I was a part of it all. A part of them, the generation. Nothing will happen, I'm sure of that...."

"But you want to be prepared."

"Not really," she corrected me gently. "I don't really want to have sex yet, I mean like that. I just want to know that I could, that I'm like them in side, you know. Maybe I do. You see, I don't know. How does one know? How do you know if people tell the truth. Like, do you think people would believe me if I told them about this?" She nodded toward her lap. "Don't you see? Do you advertise it? Do you keep your mouth shut? Three nights ago I actually sat in the library figuring out ways that I could arrange to get raped. I did. I had this elaborate plan all worked out, too. I was going to hitch into certain places in Boston until it happened. Then I decided, why bother. I'll just tell people I was raped. Then I decided I'd cut myself on the leg or something in case they made me prove it. So, instead of

that I got a diaphragm. I don't even have a boyfriend. It's all so pitiful and humiliating.” She turned away from me. “I feel so foolish telling you this now. You really must think I'm weird. I won't take any more of your time go.”

Hoping she would stay, I did my best to describe my reactions to her. It was only natural for her to be confused, I said clumsily, for no one knows what others are demanding and why. But she should have faith in her own decisions and a sense of a “right way.” It was a speech most of us would make. It contained references to the difficulty of being young, the need for autonomy, the pressure of peer groups, her rights, and the value of speaking with adults from time to time. She was already at the door, holding her coat in front of herself when she mumbled thank you and smiled kindly.

“It helps a little to see you,” she said, “but not enough. I have to live out there, with them, and it's more difficult, I can assure you, than any course this school. See, I have to do it all alone. Without you, without my parents. With them, the good ones and the animals. Boys and girls. I have to have a diaphragm because it's 1972, because maybe of what you all think we're doing.” Her tears, which had stopped while I spoke, welled up again in her eyes, and she shook her head in disbelief. “That's what I meant before. Do I have sex because they want me to, because I want to, because my parents are worried about it? You know, rebellion, the independence thing? Do I have it because you say I don't have to, or because I'm not attractive? And if I do, will I have to keep doing it? Will I want to keep doing it?” She leaned toward me, holding on to the doorknob. “Am I going to become a whore? Is that what I'm supposed to get out of my college education?”

I saw myself in the soul of a 20-year-old man about six months ago. We have been friends, this young construction worker-carpenter's apprentice and I, for several years. He left high school six months before graduating, taking jobs first in a cleaning store, then for less than three weeks as a dishwasher in a tavern. I used to kid him during lunch hours on his job at various construction sites, about the negotiations he had made with his girl. Their agreements, I remarked, about what they could do separately and together sounded not unlike the will of a wealthy baron. He laughed out loud as he recalled his earlier words to me. He used to say things like, “See, we've got it worked out. I get to see other chicks and she sees other guys. I'll tell her, like, what I think is motivating me, you know, and whether it's really pure, or whether I'm just into some flesh trip. Course that's all right if it's only that, cause we've agreed that you can actually love people in different ways. With the mind, you know, and with the body, and we want to experience everything so that we'll really know if we're together, where we're coming from, you know. Staying together forever, man, is a helluva step. For the girl too. I ain't about to go getting a divorce with kid there bawling I've seen enough of that. So, when she meets another guy, I sort of psychoanalyze her to see what she's really feeling about this guy. You know, why she thinks she needs to see the guy. Then I can sort of tell her whether it seems rational, you know, or whether she's into some spiritual thing, spaced out, you know what I mean, just stud tripping. She does the same for me. Like we do it for one another.”

I was so astounded to hear this from him, the codicils of the will, that I actually blurted out, “Do you two ever have time to make love?” He laughed and shook his head as if to say, you know, it sounded rather contorted to me too.

Three months ago, however, there was no gaiety between us. They had broken up. “I just can't believe it, man. She just split. Left all herself...”

“Her stuff, you mean?”

“Yeah, her stuff. What'd I say?”

“Her self.”

“I wish,” he mused. “I got all her clothes and things in my place.”

“Another guy?”

“I guess so, yeah. I just see her everywhere though, man. Everywhere I go, I see her, like, sitting there, like she's following me around. I even went home to talk to my ma about it.”

“What'd she say?”

“Go out and get a job!” He smiled. “Good ol' ma. But it was strange, man, finding myself going home over a thing like that. Just like a little boy, huh, going home to his mommy, telling her his girl ran out? Jesus. You wouldn't think a thing like this could get you down so\`Ever happened to you?”

“Yes.”

“Hurt?”

“Better believe it,” I answered.

“So you know.”

“I know.”

“You know what I found out? She made it with a bunch of guys. Handed me all that crap about having to get to know where her head's at, and she's running around in and out of the sack. Ain't those kind of girls got any sense of guilt? You'd think something could stop 'em. Baby, it really hurts me. It really hurts.

“I want to confess something to you I, haven't told anyone. You repeat it, I'll deny it. I've been going to the church on our block and sitting there way in the back, you know, just crying my eyes out. I've been praying she'd come back. I've got all her stuff in my place, still smells like her. I got some of her clothes I smell all the time. Smells just like her. I just sit in that church and cry, man, like a goddamn baby. The crying carpenter. Even thought of killing myself. You imagine that? You know who I blame?”

“Yourself?”

“No sir.” He sounded emphatic. “Not in the least. I blame this screwed-up society. Rich kids, poor kids, white kids, black kids and all their folks and grandfolks. They got this new morality thing going here. This sex revolution thing. Everybody's supposed to be humping and jumping. Ain't anybody anymore knows if he's in love, or just turned on. You get some girl, see her like, then move in with her and everything's O.K. Then there's all that talking and the hassle. There's no way to straighten yourself out. What they need is a sex cop standing on the corner telling you where to go.”

“But it works for a lot of people.”

“Yeah, sure it does,” he agreed. “Works awful pretty for a lot of people. Makes 'em free. Hell, it made me free for eight months. Beautiful, man. I think I loved her. I loved her. What can I say? Now I got

this.” He showed me the back of his hand. I saw a large gash and stitches. “Put it right through a stair rail last week. That’s in case you thought I was lying about being in the church. Burns me that everybody’s got to go experimenting. Everybody with her was an experiment. One night experiments. What you could call house calls. And me, like a fool, I’m sitting around watching. Guys are making it everywhere I turn and I’m letting her run around so’s we can talk about it every night “stead of getting stoned.” For a few moments we said nothing. Then he spoke again.

“You see that dude over there?” He pointed to another worker. “That guy specializes in rich girls. He says he’s helping the cause. Dude goes up to the square every night to find college chicks. He’s got a business going. Says he’s got all these chicks feeling guilty about being rich or smart. You believe that? With all the s— going around, he may be telling the truth,” he grinned. “Going around like a social worker.”

“And you’re sitting in the church crying.”

“Can you beat it? You know what he told me? He said, with pride, man, that he knocked this one girl up, and when she came back after having an abortion somewhere— in New York maybe, or Puerto Rico? That sound right? Anyway, when she came back like a couple of months later, he comes on to her again, and doesn’t even recognize it’s the same chick. And she lets him. I mean, it’s her thing too, man. Who’s to say what’s good or bad? Last year they did drugs. This year it’s abortions. We’re just following your dreams.”

“My dreams?”

“You know. The press, TV. They got all these ideas of what we do, so we do ‘em. Anyway, let me finish. The dude there makes it with this girl, right, and when they’re all done, she tells him. And he says, ‘Sonofabitch. How you making out?’ And don’t you think she got pregnant all over again. A rich college girl.”

“Jesus,” was all I could say.

“Place is crazy, man,” he continued. “I can see it all around. Old people’s marriages are coming apart, young people playing every which way at marriage. I did, ‘fraid to go all the way. Everybody thinking sex’s going to do it for ‘em. People ‘fraid to say they’re uptight about this or that. I tell you, man, they need a cop down here to direct the traffic.”

“And so what becomes of you?” I asked.

“Me? I’m into drugs, pretty big now, I suppose.”

“Speed?”

“Speed, a little acid on the weekends. You know. At home it works out, but then you get with your friends”

“And after drugs?”

“Maybe the closet.” This was his word for homosexuality. “Don’t rightly know. You gotta try everything now. Isn’t that what they say? Gotta experience new spaces, man.”

“But you speak as though you had no control. Where ever the tide pushes, that's where you move.”

“That's a good way of saying it. You live down here, that's the way you think.” I was shaking my head again in disbelief. In fact, the gesture was becoming reflexive in conversations like these. What got to me now was his way of sounding as though nothing lived within him. If instincts drove my generation, then society or any leftover pieces of it seemed to drive his. “You move with the times, man,” he was saying. “People have expectations for you, so you live up to 'em. It's the same with you. Society's got a hold on your leg, too. It says, marry some chick and stay that way. Me, it says mess around and be a big man. No one's gonna care when you settle down, so go make it with every chick in sight. I want 'em all. Only thing I wish is that you guys would make up your mind about

“Us guys?”

“Yeah. You guys. You talked here the other month about a sex revolution. No kid my age is smart enough to invent something like that. Anything that big's gotta come from the old and the rich. So when you all make up your mind, we all might get it together down here. Till that time, man, I got lots of tears left to come out, and lots of pills.”

“Phone me if you want me,” is how I left him, not sure exactly what I wanted to say.

“What for, man?” he called back from near the lunch wagon on Copley Street. “You got a bunch of extra girls or something lying around?”

“No.”

“You afraid I might hurt myself?”

“Maybe. I don't know.” I was uncomfortable yelling the words to him.

“If I decide to blow my brains out, I'll buzz you.”

When she was 13 she had an abortion. Thanks to a social worker and a teacher, no one learned of it, and a short absence from school for reasons of illness was all anyone ever knew about. The operation had crushed her mother, angered her father and provoked her eldest brother to beat up a young man he claimed to be the father. The young man's jaw and nose were broken, his right eye cut so severely that normal vision never returned. The victim of the assault, however, was not the father of the child.

When she was 15, her parents arranged to send her to a school in the suburbs where, as her mother hoped, “she might meet good kids and be away from these dirty streets they got around here.” She was one of very few black women in the school and in the first few days several white students came to her, and to those with whom she was bused, inquiring about drugs. Several boys asked her out but she refused them. Later in the year, however, she accepted some of their requests for dates.

We spoke once in the school bus riding back to Boston. Her posture never changed, her expression remained fixed, resigned. “When they see a black girl come in to their school they only think of one thing. Black girls, they think, are loose. Maybe they aren't for black guys, but they're supposed to be for white guys. It's always been that way. But now they go calling it a sexual revolution which means, I guess, that nobody's supposed to care what people are thinking of you. But a lot of 'em out there got that sex revolution mixed up with racism. They're just thinking anything they do is all right cause people are supposed to be expressing everything and you're not supposed to be hung up with

morality. But a lot of it is racism. If they found out about my, you know, what happened to me, they'd be all over me. Even now some of 'em are expecting me to be some kind of a teacher or something. These kids, you see, think we're the ones who got this sex thing going. They think all that stuff starts where we live. But they got it all in their homes. Every one of 'em practically has divorced parents, I'll bet. They go blaming it on us just so they don't have anybody snooping around them. But their kids know. Problem is, they just can't go telling anybody. Who they gonna tell it to? So you know who they tell it to?"

"You?"

"Right on." She smiled broadly for the first time that afternoon. "I know as much about some of them as you know about me. More even." She looked at me, then down at her hands. "I went to this party the other night out there. A whole bunch of us went, actually. It was really a laugh. All these guys were there walking around as if nothing bothered them. Listening to them you'd think sex was the only thing on their minds. It's like they got to tell you about it so you'll know there's nothing wrong with them. Some of 'em are real nice too. Real nice. I could like 'em if they'd just stop acting as though they were all grown up, like their fathers— or their stepfathers, if you know what I mean. It's like nobody wants to be a kid any more. Nothing for anybody to do, so everybody gets into drugs and sex, and like I said before, they go around making you think that we're better at drugs and sex. Boy, if what they thought ever were true it sure would be one sick world."

I asked her then "that" special question, about whether there is a lot of sex in the school. I fumbled with the words and tried my best to let her know that I really didn't want to know, but I really did, but then again.... She laughed. "Sometimes, Tom, I don't really think even you know what you want to ask. Now, do you want to know if everybody's making it with everybody? That it?" She turned her body toward me, looked quickly around at some of the other students and held her hands, palms up, in front of me. "'Cause they ain't. Lotta kids are plenty frightened. Lotta them don't know what to do. Nobody knows what's going on, except may be that the teachers and the parents are all nervous

"But I can understand that. I'd be nervous, too, if I had a kid my age going to school. I'm not so sure I could trust me. Kids our age don't know all that much. I can tell from what you say, that you feel that. It's probably true. Even with what I've been through, I'm still kind of a child. Old in some ways, but a child in lots of other ways. Everybody talks about some big change in sex and all that, but they don't know. Just cause you have sex doesn't mean you really care for somebody. And a lot of the teachers, they're only against sex cause they got it through their heads that nobody's really supposed to show anybody else they really like 'em. And then a lot of kids, they think sex means you're caring for somebody. So if you have a lot of sex, you follow me, then that means you care for a lot of people. And that sure ain't true. I know lots of the sisters, right on this bus, been hurt plenty by lots of guys. Lots of 'em. They've done some hurting in their time too. So I don't know. I think everybody's got sex mixed up with a whole lot of other

"But I'll tell you the big mistake you all make." There was a sadness in her voice now, as well as anger. "You think it's easy to be young and just go running around, no cares, no responsibilities, like. That's your mistake. You all think we can do anything and get away with it, but that's because you're only interested in the excitement. You know something? They got girls in this school so lonely they can't talk about it. But when they get themselves pregnant, then some one's gotta listen. Ain't no body interested in a boy or girl having a fight or trying to figure out their lives, what they're gonna become, you know. But if he knocks her up, or beats her up, then all the adults come running. They just don't want people misbehaving. So afraid we're going to be doing something all the time. You should only know how many ways I gotta look before I take a step. My mother and my father, and political kids who say I shouldn't see white boys, kids back at home who say I shouldn't be seen with suburban kids,

older kids, younger kids. Holy Jesus, by the time they figure out who I can see, it'll be down to one guy some

“You uneasy talking to me now?”

“Course I am. You're white and there are all kinds of reasons we shouldn't be talking. Sexual revolution is what you're interested in? Political revolution is what I'm interested in. There's always going to be a wall between you and me, just like there's always gonna be someone seeing us thinking I'm your woman. Most important revolution will be over when they see me just as a woman, not as your woman.” Several students in the seat in front of us heard her. I watched them nodding their heads. One turned to look respectfully at her.

“So I'm not going to tell you everything I'm thinking but one more thing. Everybody now's talking so much about sex and drugs, and stuff like that, even though they know those aren't the problems everybody's having. But they talk about 'em anyway. And that means that when you're a kid you can't have any thoughts that are really your own. Every time you say something you're just saying what everybody's already said. Your mother, your teacher, the newspaper, television, even you!” She pointed her finger at my nose. “There ain't nothing I've thought of that other people didn't think of before. Or felt! So I can't do anything new or say anything new, something really mine, except maybe with some man, or some pill. You ever think of that? That's the only time I create, you know? The only time I know that what I'm doing is mine, and honest. All the other time is like playing this big game, moving here or moving there just 'cause everybody expects you to be doing it. They hand you all this sex revolution jive all the time, but if you ask me—and you did, you know—I think it's just another way they're trying to watch over us. Jail us, maybe. While they go talking we gotta go snooping around. Can't keep no secrets, can't make no deals, can't even keep your loneliness to yourself no more.” She looked at me as if to test my strength. “Bad as it was, that little operation of mine's about the only thing that let me know freedom. You think you can understand that?”

A man, on his 18th birth day, made a pledge that, before the year was out, he would no longer be a virgin. Only his roommate knew of this pledge, indeed most of his other friends would have been shocked to learn of how “limited” were his sexual experiences at that point. In truth, he had boasted to them of his exploits, never lying, but instead making sure to use language that would make them believe he had experienced everything. “If any of them had ever bothered to play back what I said, they'd have seen I've done nothing,” he told me one afternoon in a Cambridge coffee shop where I used to read poetry with a young man who died a year ago from an overdose of drugs. “If they ever listened to me, I mean, really listened to me, they'd see I wasn't really saying anything.” We drank our tea in silence, the only two people in the shop on this hazy spring afternoon.

“It all seems so strange,” he continued, “that there should be so much emphasis placed on sex in this country. You have to assert yourself one way or the other. Everybody wonders if you don't.”

“So let 'em wonder.”

“Can't. You can say that, but I can't do it. You're older. People wonder. What can I say? They wonder. They look at you when you come home after a date as though checking you out. I do it myself. I try to imagine what the guy might have done, or where they went. Do you believe,” he went on, “that men can really be impotent?”

“You mean physically?”

“Yeah. I mean, not psycho somatic or whatever you say.”

“Yes, I suppose some men are physically incapable of ...” I began before he cut me off.

“I am, you know.”

“Physically?”

“What's the difference. can't make it. I can't perform and that's what America's all about, isn't it?” he replied bitterly. “You know, Cadillacs coming off the production lines, buildings being torn down, and bigger and bigger ones going up. More people, more cities, bigger wars. Bigger bombs. Promiscuity. That's what men are supposed to do, isn't it, make every girl they see?”

“I didn't know that was the game.”

“Sure looks that way to me,” he said.

“And what are women supposed to say to all that? Do the big men in your dorm ever talk about that?” My fury, which I hoped would put him at ease—for I was trying after all to be his ally—was not totally disingenuous. I am, truthfully, tired of the extraordinary pressures put on people to perform in certain ways, at certain times, and to be good and beautiful at what they do on every occasion. I recalled a concert pianist saying to my wife and me one night, “Did anyone ever think that maybe some of us may not feel like playing Mozart on Saturday night from 8:45 to 9:06? Did anyone ever think that maybe we'd like to play baseball at that time, or that maybe if they want to hear us at our best they should come to our house at five in the morning when we can't sleep? I play Mozart then, and plenty good too sometimes.”

“Yes,” my friend was saying, “the men in my dorm think of that. But men's performance still comes first to them.”

“Let me tell you something,” I began. “I'm tired of all the pressures your supposedly liberated generation puts on itself. May I?”

“Go ahead,” he said.

“I don't buy this consciousness two, three, four, five jazz. I don't buy the idea that the young have it all. What the hell is going on in these dorms that everyone is pushing people to behave? So what if you're not screwing. You will. Or you won't for a while. Country doesn't need any more babies for a while any way. Your time will come.”

He smiled. Had there been others in the shop they could have seen that he enjoyed my performance. He was pleased. But they would have seen, too, that he was not at all relieved. “My time has come,” he said finally.

“What's that mean?” Now it was he who sounded like the professional; calm, measured, thoughtful, everything under painful control.

“I've met a girl that I guess I love.”

“So, great.”

“Not so easy,” he said. “She's great. I'm great with her, but sex isn't so great.”

“You try?”

“Tom,” he laughed weakly, looking as if he wanted to soothe me by patting my hand, “I can't do it.”

“She can?”

“She's had two miscarriages, my friend. She can.” He smiled kindly. “Miscarriages don't just happen. She's trying hard but I'm, well, failing. I'm just a flop.” With his fingers closed he jerked his thumb downwards and made a popping sound with his mouth.

“Do you talk about it?”

“You got anything in mind that we should talk about other than that? What do you think we do all night if we can't make it? We talk about it. Seems all I do is talk. The only way I have to make myself useful is to listen to her talk about her personal problems. Her past and all. These guys, you know, and the miscarriages. I've changed a lot in these last two months. You learn from women like you can't ever learn from men. In fact, we've both learned a lot from mothers.”

“Like what?”

“Well, it's sort of a happy coincidence that both of our mothers could feel free enough to be able to tell us about some of their problems. You know, things from their private lives. Both of them, for example, are impotent [I believed that he meant to say frigid], I guess, although they've each had several children. We have three and Molly's family has two. She has a younger sister. And both of our fathers, I'm pretty sure now, have had kind of a lot of affairs.”

“Your mothers have told you all that?”

“Hmm. My mother told me. Her mother told her.”

“The fathers tell you too?”

“No, no. My real father's dead, her father and mother were divorced when she was very small. Maybe 10, I think, younger even, maybe. I just learned a lot of this recently. Right before I went off to college last year, you know, first child, first time away from home thing, my mother and I had this long talk about dating and sex. I thought she was pretty damn courageous talking as openly as she did. She'd agree with you, I think. Her generation's probably a helluva lot more open than mine, like you were saying before.”

He seemed perfectly at ease, almost clinical in his way. It was I who felt anxious hearing this new information and watching all these ideas and notions move about in space, totally disconnected.

“Yeah, she told me just about everything she's ever done. Or didn't do. And I told her too. Although I didn't have very much to tell her. Mothers can be all right. They can be rotten too, but they can be all right. They take a lot of crap.”

“Like fathers having affairs,” I offered.

“Like fathers having affairs, exactly, and getting young girls pregnant.”

“That happened too?”

“Not in our family, but in Molly's.”

“Well, so what do we do?” I questioned him at last.

“That's your role. You're supposed to say.”

“You want to talk to someone? Shrink maybe?”

“I knew you'd say that. I am talking to someone. You. Right now.”

“I know, but I thought you might want to see someone else. Professionally.”

“No, not really.”

“But there's a problem, no?”

“It's the biggest problem,” he said with a sudden firmness in his speech. “But I'm not about to fall down before your psychiatric gods and let them eat my mind up alive. The second you make that first appointment with the shrink you're labeling yourself sick, frigid, impotent, whatever. No, sir. You have to pull yourself out of it, otherwise all that's happening is that our society is swallowing you up. You ought to be able to appreciate that!”

“Yeah, somewhat.”

“It's got to be person-to-person. Not patient to doctor. You label me sick, you label my whole background, my whole history sick.”

“Which would mean that your mother and father too would be labeled in the process.”

“That's exactly right, pal,” he responded angrily. “That's exactly right. What are they going to do, make my mother come into therapy with me? And my sisters? And Molly and her past boyfriends, I suppose? What are we going to do, have a séance so we can all ask my father some questions? How about an intergenerational seminar on impotence, maybe? That's what it means, you know. You implicate everyone, whether you want to or not. What you're saying is that all of us are sick.”

We sat in silence. I could see his eyes moistening with tears. “It's pitiful,” he was saying. “It's all so pitiful. I feel dead inside. Lifeless, burdened, desperate. Not really lifeless. I don't know. There's nothing to do, really. You don't have this problem, I guess, do you?”

“No.” I wanted to add, thank God.

“You're lucky.”

“I've had my silent, lifeless moments, though.” He seemed a bit relieved. In fact, he even smiled slightly.

“Maybe,” he started, “if you could loan me some of your hormones, I might be able to start a little sexual revolution this weekend.” We looked at one another, neither of us smiling.

“A whole revolution you need?” I joked.

“I need one shot. One crumby lousy shot in the dark. Just loud enough for everybody to hear.”

Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/11/26/archives/the-sexual-revolution-and-the-young-four-studies-the-sexual.html>