From "The Sixties"
By Jenny Diski
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BODY WORK

> We had these appetites that we understood and it was wonderful that they were taken care of. It was a moment where everybody was giving to the other person what they wanted. The women knew that's what the men wanted.
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> —Interview with Leonard Cohen in the *Globe and Mail*, Weekend Review, Canada, 26 May 2007

> People fucked back then just as much as they do now. We just didn't talk about it as much.
>
> —Henry Miller in the film *Reds*, 1981

In 1973 I was teaching at a girls' state comprehensive school in Hackney, East London. One day after an English lesson with a class of fourteen-year-olds, a girl stayed behind to speak to me. She looked very awkward, near to tears, surprising because she was an outspoken, knowing young woman.

"What's up?"

It took her a while to explain, or for me to understand exactly what the problem was. She didn't know what to do, she said. What about? Well, she'd put a Tampax in, you know, inside her, when she got her period last week. And? The string, she didn't know how, but the string sort of went up, too. She forgot to pull it out first, she supposed. And? Well, what should she do? About what?

Finally, it dawned on me.

"You mean it's still in there? After a week?"

"Yes, Miss. I don't know what to do. Should I go to the doctor?"

I still hadn't got the problem.

"Just take it out."

"But I can't. The string's not there."

"Put your fingers into your vagina and take it out."

Her face changed from worry to pure disgust.

"What, put my fingers up inside me? I'm not touching myself there. Miss!"

The next day I brought my copy of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* by the Boston Women's Health Collective into school and left it in an unlocked cupboard in my room. It described women's and men's bodies, how they worked, what they did, how they did it, in straightforward language with simple drawings and photographs. The coffee-table-sized paperback, a US import, became so dog-eared and smudged with page-turning and fingermarks I had to replace it every couple of terms with a new copy. I'd arrive in my classroom after break and lunch to see knots of girls already there, crowded round one of the tables and the book open in front of them.

This, as I say, was in 1973. Long after the *Lady Chatterley* ban and the Beatles' first LP. People may well have fucked freely back in the early twentieth century, and even for Philip Larkin sexual intercourse had started ten years previously, as indeed it probably had already for many of the girls poring over the book, but in 1973 in Hoxton, London, a fourteen-year-old young woman who used the word "fuck" like a comma, told smutty jokes and almost certainly knew what a penis looked and felt like had been walking around with a

week-old tampon inside her because it was "dirty" to put her fingers into her vagina.

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The year before I had helped to set up a free school for some local hard-core truants, which was eventually funded by Camden Council and sited in one of several sheds in an old soon-to-be-built-on freightliner depot, along with a youth club, an old people's lunch club and a women's centre. After a few weeks, there were complaints from the women's centre that the free school kids were breaking in to their shed at night. Nothing was taken, nothing damaged, apart from the door lock and the light left on all night. We asked the kids about it. Yeah, they said, the boys, anyway. There was this poster stuck on the wall of the women's centre. They'd broken in to look at it. What was it? Shrugs. Y'know. Nope, don't know. What was it? No one would say. We went to look, and saw on the wall, opposite a window, a two foot by two foot colour poster, all pinks, reds and purples, of a vulva, spread wide open, showing the labia and entrance to the vagina. At the time, women's groups were keen on investigating their own bodies. They examined their sexual parts with the aid of speculums, mirrors and their friends, familiarising themselves with what was felt to have been appropriated by men for their own private gaze. The free school boys, children and young adolescents, wanted to see as well.

"What did you do?"

"Looked at it."

"Is that all?"

"Well, we jerked off. Obviously."

It did seem obvious, speaking to them. The women were furious. They were being violated, they said. We explained this to the free school kids.

"Well," one of them said. "I'd never seen one just there on a wall like that before. What else you supposed to do with it? What do they expect?"

It was an interesting point, and quite a fruitful discussion began about the nature of different points of view of a single subject. The boys went to the woman in charge and apologised for breaking in. They weren't well received. If it happened again, she was going to call the police. The women's centre and the free school kids never did see eye to eye.

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Taking off our clothes was an important part of the project of undoing the constraints we perceived our elders to have been immobilised by. We stripped conscientiously in front of each other and made nothing of it. Sex was written about and acted out in private and public with enthusiasm in the name of the sexual revolution. The idea was to have fun, because having fun with our bodies was a completely new way of being with our peers. Of course we were young and therefore taking our clothes off was relatively unproblematic, because what we saw was on the whole easy to look at. We scorned covering ourselves up for any other reason than aesthetics—and warmth. Clothes (except the beautiful, floaty, diaphanous kind that invited the slightest zephyr to puff them away) were an obstacle to the freedom of

bodies, and also signified the draping of the mind. In 1973—the early Seventies, a seminal period it seems for discovering that not so much had changed—Erica Jong's heroine Isadora Wing[4] had finally defined what it was the Sixties generation were in search of, and evidently still hadn't found. It was "the zipless fuck." It seemed to be several things all at once, not all of them compatible: it was wildly romantic, a teen dream of you didn't quite know what glimpsed frustratingly in vague erotic prose and on movie screens:

> Zipless because when you came together zippers fell away like rose petals, underwear blew off in one breath like dandelion fluff. Tongues intertwined and turned liquid. Your whole soul flowed out through your tongue and into the mouth of your lover.

It was also emotionally utopian. Free from the complexities of possessive responses trained by the rigid, repressive social apparatus that caused the Fifties generation to moulder, as we saw it, in sexual frustration. All done up in tight-waisted, hobble-skirted, corseted clothing and manners.

> The zipless fuck is absolutely pure. It is free of ulterior motives. There is no power game. The man is not "taking" and the woman is not "giving." No one is attempting to cuckold a husband or humiliate a wife. No one is trying to prove anything or get anything out of anyone. The zipless fuck is the purest thing there is. And it is rarer than the unicorn. And I have never had one.

The reality of the zipless fuck was as far removed from romance as it was possible to get. That was the point:

> For the true, ultimate zipless A-1 fuck, it was necessary that you never get to know the man very well. . . . So another condition for the zipless fuck was brevity. And anonymity made it even better.

Of course, the zipless fuck absolutely required the pill, without which fumbling and anxiety, no matter how advanced the mind might be, was unavoidable. It was invented in 1961, but was available only to married women or those brave enough to get a cheap ring from Woolworths and brazen it out in grim family planning clinics. Between 1962 and 1969, the number of users in the UK rose from approximately 50,000 to one million. It helped not to have to rely on men to use condoms properly or withdraw at the right moment, or have to remember to put in the diaphragm before, but not too long before, it was likely you were going to have sex. It was a great advance for women in general, worldwide, even for the cause of sexual liberation. But the fact that Isadora was still looking for this unencumbered encounter in 1973, and that women found *Fear of Flying* a compelling read, tells us a lot about the difficulty of achieving the sexual revolution we had been trying so hard for. The post-war generation was brought up by parents who aimed for respectability, and to conceal any suggestion that the body was not under the strict control of the civilised mind. The great weapons were shame and embarrassment. It was not only difficult to find yourself unmarried and pregnant (bring-

ing up children is at any period a very tough one-person activity), it was a disgrace. Hiding the fact was far more important than dealing with it. Our parents, a generation that had responded to the uncertainty of war with a good deal of sexual licence (the writer John Mortimer remembered VE Day, when the grassy expanses of Hyde Park heaved with copulating couples), and during the bombings and enforced separations snatched physical pleasure in the face of absence and death, now scurried back to the social straight and narrow and impressed on its children the need to conform. Working-class or middle-class, respectability, in the sense of not doing anything the neighbours didn't want you to think they did, was a very high priority.

The sexual revolution is certainly an idea people have about the Sixties. It was also an idea that the Sixties had about itself even though there was, as Henry Miller said, nothing new about small groups of usually affluent or arty people having complicated, delightful and miserable sex with each other. Screwing, joyfully or grimly or even obediently, like rabbits, as if there were no tomorrow. Sex is presumably always a brand new discovery to every generation. A secret they had better not tell their parents about, in case, God forbid, they take it up. In some periods this has happened in spite of the parents doing their damnedest to keep it a secret not just from their children but also from themselves. The Fifties was not an optimum time for sexual openness. Books that had any bearing on the subject were banned or not published without much challenge. It was very hard to get any information about the body. Ignorance and received morality were believed

to stroll hand in hand, just like back before we were cast out of the garden. This time it was back gardens and yards with fences just the right height to gossip over. In any case, in the Fifties, England was not conducive in a practical way to bodily delight. Houses were cold and damp, with no central heating. Bathrooms were grim, icy affairs of chilled, cracking lino and uncertain waterheaters that gave up their hot water, after a good deal of clanking and groaning, in a thin stream that was inclined to run cold when the money in the gas meter ran out long before the bath was more than a puddle. The spa experience was a long way off. The sensual pleasures of steaming scented wet-rooms where bodies were (worth it, worth it) deservedly pampered, muscles relaxed, skin moisturised in preparation for a night of love of self or other, alone or in company, was too remotely in the future even to daydream about in the draughty washrooms of 1957. When you'd brushed your teeth and washed your face, you stripped off your clothes and pulled on your nightdress or pyjamas and dived into bed as quickly as you possibly could. Hot water bottle. Eiderdown. Being naked just meant being cold well into the mid-Sixties. Hard to tell if people made love under the covers out of primness or protection against the frost.

Language was the equivalent of the icy bathroom. The euphemism ruled. As if "period" was not evasive enough, my mother described her monthly bleeding, and eventually mine, as "being unwell." It was not at all surprising to have to spend several days a month on a sofa, suffering, though why, and from what exactly, remained a mystery to me until I was twelve. She warned

me when I was eleven that when I "became a woman" she might have to slap my face because of the shock I would receive one day in the bathroom. Blood wasn't mentioned. The worst thing I and my classmates could imagine was someone—a boy especially, but even another girl, oh, anyone—seeing a sanitary towel hidden in our schoolbag. And the terror of "coming on" and finding you had been walking around with a spot of blood on the back of your skirt . . . The shame was that people would know you were doing what every woman does once a month for a third of her life—bleeding.

At thirteen I came across an item in a home medical encyclopedia about "self-abuse." Though it suggested quite liberally that there was nothing dangerous about it, the name itself, and the fact that it had an entry, made it clear that it was a medical problem. It described "touching the private parts," and I realised that I did that every night, drifting off to sleep, curled up in bed with my hand between my legs, holding my vulva. I had not the slightest notion of orgasm, nor did the article talk about the purpose of the touching, only that it was nothing to worry about, though it was a good idea to talk about it to a doctor if you did it regularly. I had my first sexual terror. Later, I would be regularly consumed with worry that I might be pregnant or have a venereal disease, but this was my first sexual bodily alarm (as it happened I didn't faint with fright on getting my period, though I wondered, when I told my mother, whether I shouldn't slap her shocked face). I was consumed by uncertainty, that cloud of sexual unknowing that hovered over our heads, fearing something was wrong with me, though I couldn't work out

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from the encyclopedia what exactly it was and what the consequences would be. Being fearful, vaguely guilty and feeling alone was what burgeoning sexuality meant to large numbers of people in the late Fifties and early Sixties.

In America the Beats, along with Humbert and his nymphet, were shocking readers and still getting banned for sexual explicitness, but in England we fell on *Lady Chatterley* in 1961, when it was finally published in an accessible paperback edition after a notorious court case ("Would you want your wives and servants reading this book?" the prosecuting counsel asked the jury). We were searching for information, though we got very little. Sexuality was there in the pages of books, but diffuse, metaphorised out of existence. Metaphor is little better than euphemism to information-hungry adolescents. Somerset Maugham and Nevil Shute wrote what were thought to be steamy novels, but they were steamy in the same way that a bathroom mirror is steamy—you fail to see what you are looking at. I read them all hopefully, but only found my misty surmises effloresced into jungles of confusion. Yes, wellings and rushings and pumpings, and never-before-experienced experiences, but *what had actually happened*, what did they *do* and *how*? It was only when social class became a serious subject in novels, plays and films that sexual and many other silences were released into the wild. *Room at the Top* came out in 1957, and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* in 1960, *A Taste of Honey* and *The L-Shaped Room* in 1961 and '62. They began to clear the mist away, and linked a vivid sexuality to youth, education and social anger,

though mostly for men. The women still longed, loved and feared that they'd get knocked up, and weren't so much sexually vivid as socially timorous or occasionally brave.

However, by the late Sixties, although we may not have done recreational drugs, we did do casual sex. We tried hard to make sex as casual as sleeping. There were, of course, couples. Two individuals bound together for longer or shorter periods, madly in love, or loving friends, or one of them having their heart broken by an unfaithful other, being betrayed or betraying in the old-fashioned way that casual sex didn't permit. But they were anomalies, we supposed, or were discovered to be people who had minded all along about things that we were supposed to have stopped caring about. People had sex because they and it were there, like climbing mountains but with less effort and preparation required, and, as we thought then, danger-free. It was late, someone would stay over or not go back to their own room. You might even really fancy someone, suddenly, or you'd think: why not? There never seemed to be a legitimate answer to that. It was on the one hand part of the vital and present task of experiencing experience, and on the other a contemporary version of good manners. Sex was a way of being polite to those who suggested it or who got into your bed. It was very difficult not to fuck someone who wanted to fuck you without feeling you were being very rude. My guess, no, my certainty, is that large numbers of people slept with friends, acquaintances and strangers that they had no desire for. I also guess that this was more desultory for women, few of whom, I regret to say,

seemed as jaunty the following day as the men who waved them a cheery farewell. Part of the newness of the world we were creating was the abolition of jealousy, and the idea of possessing other people. The "that's your problem" catch-all for complaints applied to sexual relations, too. You took responsibility for yourself and this meant not making demands on others whose wishes were different from your own. Clearly, this was not an equally balanced provision. Wanting overrode not wanting. To stop someone having something they wanted was to be a drag, really controlling, just laying "your problem" on others who were unburdened by your hang-ups. But I do recall a few gentle souls who wandered into my room and asked tentatively, "Want a fuck?" and then wandered out again without stopping to debate my problem if I replied with a sleepy "No, thanks."

But there was a large principle at state. If sex was no longer going to be a taboo then it was hard to think of a good reason not to have it with anyone who came along. It was uncool to say no. It was easier to say yes than to explain. It was difficult to come up with a justification for refusing to have sex with someone that didn't seem selfish. The idea that rape was having sex with someone who didn't want to do it didn't apply very much in the late Sixties. On the basis that no means no, I was raped several times by men who arrived in my bed and wouldn't take no for an answer. But not wanting wasn't the main thing. It doesn't sound so exciting, this sexual revolution, does it? Mostly it wasn't. Open relationships were frequently tried, but I

never came across any where at least one of the pair was not suffering and eventually unable to suppress it. There was a commune set up near my place which a friend of mine stayed in when he needed somewhere to live. The rules of the commune were that you weren't allowed to sleep with the same person for more than three nights in a row, so that no couples developed. Sex was free, relationships were forbidden. In order for the non-possessive rule to work, everyone there had to be prepared to sleep with everyone else—though I believe that men were exempted from having to have sex with men if they didn't want to. My friend found it very tiring packing up his bag and moving on to the next room every few days, and turned up at my flat from time to time to get a few regular nights' sleep.

In order to fight against the arbitrary moral codes the bourgeois world imposed on the young, the young imposed on themselves arbitrary physical requirements that took very little account of the complexity of human emotional connections. We cut a swathe through the conventions, but invented new conventions that gave us just as much heartache. Liberation, at least in its sexual form, was a new form of imposed morality, quite as restricting and causing at least as much repression as we accused our parents' generation of creating. Our elders called it permissiveness, but the permission we gave ourselves was more like a set of orders for disobeying our elders.

The journalist John Lloyd describes his experience of a commune, which sounds remarkably similar to the very one my friend had occasionally to escape from.

> In our flat, which we ran as a commune, the whole sex thing was extremely earnest. There was a lot of promiscuity, everybody had to swap partners. We didn't get into homosexuality, it was all heterosexuality. I'm not sure whether we really did elevate it above wife-swapping. It was quite exploitative of male and female. It was a lot of men liking to fuck a lot and saying to women, "Why won't you fuck me?" I remember saying that quite a lot. And some women who were strong and sensible enough said, "Because I don't want to," but quite often it was "Well . . . all right . . ." Contraception was generally available, and there was an ethos of doing it, and it was good and it was liberating and it was an act of friendship or love. But we weren't really liberated—all of us had a lot of hang-ups. We had been brought up traditionally, even strictly, and to try to leap out of your own habits and upbringing into this blissful state where there were not hang-ups was of course interesting psychologically, but it was completely impossible. And all the jealousies and tensions just grew exponentially.[5]

Another version is Richard Neville's afterthought:

> Part of battling against a joyless morality—don't fuck until you get married, and when you do you'll both be so dreadful you'll probably get divorced. I had come from a very bad marriage and I was interested in men and women working out a different sort of sexual/social behaviour. But of course there is some truth in the idea that this was institutionalising getting laid, providing a political framework for sex. I loved women and I loved making love to them. I loved fucking and there were lots of people around who felt the same. I don't think that anyone was pushed into bed by me. A lot of girls climbed through my window.[6]

Communes weren't a brand new idea, but we could hardly avoid investigating them. The nuclear family model was beginning to look very limited. So we set up communes or lived communally in our flats, sharing the washing-up and each other's lovers, and then discovered what that meant in the actual day-to-day living. Usually a terrible mess and a lot of anger—regarding both the washing-up and the sex. The communal dream invariably ended in acrimony as all the tensions of the old way of living pulled the group idea apart. Children, love, money, work, privacy and ownership were all ancient and crucial issues that for the most part we failed successfully to negotiate. To tell each other that other cultures lived in this way didn't take into account our lack of experience in living in any way at all. All the time, in every aspect of our lives, the thing we forgot, and the thing that enabled us to do what we did, was the fact of our being young.

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And once again, as with the funding for our radical ways of life, it wasn't the young really who were in charge of enabling this sexual revolution that our elders and ourselves talked so much about. The pill, the great enabler of fearless sex (for a short while) was developed

by that older generation. And the easing of sexual repression in the UK began, if it had a beginning, in the heart of everything we most despised: government. Roy Jenkins was Home Secretary of the Labour government between 1965 and 1967. Born in 1920, he was not part of the Sixties generation but an upper-middle-class liberal with no time for Victorian morality. In 1959 he wrote a pamphlet called *Is Britain Civilised?*

> The need is to campaign for a general climate of opinion favourable to gaiety and tolerance, and opposed to puritanical restriction and a drab, ugly pattern of life. It is not really a job for politicians, of course, although they, like any other leaders of opinion, can do something to set the tone . . . But the important thing is to encourage them all, and to recognise that one form of intolerance breeds another and one type of drabness makes another more likely. Let us be on the side of those who want people to be free to live their own lives, to make their own mistakes, and to decide in an adult way and provided they do not infringe the rights of others, the code by which they wish to live; and on the side too of experiment and brightness, of better buildings and better food, of better music (jazz as well as Bach) and better books, of fuller lives and greater freedom. In the long run these things will be more important than even the most perfect of economic policies.[7]

The permission was already available, long before the Sixties generation were blamed for instigating the per-

missive society. During his time as Home Secretary, Jenkins (hardly a radical socialist) oversaw the relaxation of a series of legal curbs on sexual and social freedom: on divorce, the abolition of theatre censorship, the legalisation of abortion and the decriminalisation of homosexuality. The world wasn't waiting for the post-war children to make it free, the post-war children were reinventing their own freedom in a climate made ready for them. Jenkins's near contemporary Mary Whitehouse, a woman who described herself as an "ordinary housewife" and was in the vanguard of the backlash against all things permissive, complained about the terrible freedoms the young were taking, but she complained much more about the liberality of those like the Home Secretary, the BBC's director-general Hugh Carlton Greene, and the Bishop of Woolwich. All of them, as far as we were concerned, were the establishment, the grown-ups, those whom we gave ourselves permission to rebel against.

Nevertheless, it was in the late Sixties that the Gay Liberation Movement took off. In London, mysterious graffiti appeared on walls everywhere saying simply "'Tis Gay." To this day, I don't know if it was part of a campaign or just some happy wall-writer extolling the joys of life. It was certainly my first sighting of the word "gay" to mean homosexual—if indeed that's what it was. It was much clearer in Greenwich Village, New York, when on 29 June 1969 the police raided the Stonewall Inn one time too many, and the gays, drag queens and transgendered patrons finally had enough. The Stonewall riots lasted for days, with local people swelling the rebellion, blockading the street

and torching the inn while the drag queens sang their anthem:

We are the Stonewall Girls
We wear our hair in curls
We wear no underwear
We show our pubic hair
We wear our dungarees
Above our nelly knees

Gay Power was born in the Sixties to battle alongside other persecuted groups—blacks, Hispanics and women—who were fighting for justice. If the general sexual revolution had its problems, gay power was the acceleration of a genuine liberation. Not that homophobia has been decisively defeated, any more than racism or sexism, even now, but attitudes have been changed, and even if it only means that bigots have to whisper their bigotry to each other, it is a real achievement of which (along with those engaged in the battle previously) the Sixties generation can be proud.

4

REMAKING THE WORLD

> ... the advance guard of the new order. We wished to transform Western civilisation because we regarded it as politically, morally and culturally bankrupt. That was the hallmark of 1968.
>
> TARIQ ALI, *Street Fighting Years*, 1987

There was an American staying in our flat in Covent Garden, on the run from the US draft to Vietnam. Seymour was a small, dark, quite round, full-bearded, long-haired, gentle soul, softly spoken, who sat in the lotus position and smiled benignly at the world he looked out at when he was tripping and even when he wasn't. We were pals. We might have had sex once or twice, I can't remember, but it wasn't the point. On Sunday morning, 17 March 1968, we set off together to Trafalgar Square for the start of the second Grosvenor Square anti-Vietnam war demonstration. He had more urgent reasons than me for protesting the Vietnam war but I'd been marching and sitting down, not being moved (actually being both physically and emotionally moved) since the Aldermaston march in 1963, when I was still just fifteen. Back then I remember walking in the middle of a great straggling column of people, mostly older than me, but many not very much older, who were chanting, singing, debating politics, and feeling I was part of something undeniably important—the continuing existence of the planet, actually—thrilled to be among them, at last, to have found a group