

A Vagina Chronicle

It wasn't until a friend confided that sexual intercourse with her husband had become painful—"like a knife being shoved into my vagina"—that the lightbulb went off. I'm not crazy. There isn't something wrong with me. This is why Hugh Hefner only kept young, nowhere-near-menopause women in his mansion. This is why men replace their wives with younger versions and buy sports cars. This is why the middle-aged man in the movie "Election" says straight into the camera: "Her pussy gets so wet, you can't believe it." When I watched the movie in 1999 (I was 40) I remember wondering why he felt compelled to disclose how wet a 16-year-old girl can be. Now I know why.

I'd been lied to.

One of my favorite mantras from the television series "House" is: Everybody lies. And everybody lies about their sex life. It was a lesson I wish I had learned in my 20s.

At the community college I attended students were required to take a class called "Human Sexuality." It was 1979. It was one of the most popular classes on campus taught by one of the most popular professors in a huge lecture hall filled with an army of students. I still have the text book. I still have images from his lectures burned in my gray matter. The most memorable being images of a close-up of female genital warts, a chancre sore on a penis, a porno magazine cover projecting a woman's sheer black stockinged legs with red patented leather high heels being put through a meat grinder, and x-rays of a variety of objects stuck up a man's rectum. I clearly remember the professor saying that the anus is for exits not entrances. Was he making a statement about anal sex? No one asked. In fact, I can't remember having a discussion about homosexuality. HIV and AIDS had yet to become part of the world stage.

I do remember when we were introduced to a man who had been a woman. At that time he was referred to as a trans-sexual because he had gone through all the counseling, hormone treatments and sex-change surgery. If I had seen him on the street I would never have guessed that he had been born female. I would never have guessed that he possessed a suitcase with different size penises. What I couldn't wrap my head around was his mind. Was his mind also no longer female? Is a mind gendered? I remember asking him the question but I don't remember his answer. I just remember walking out of the lecture hall thinking that so much of his life is centered on gender identity and sexuality, from the lectures he gives and the counseling he provides other trans individuals to the medications he takes. Isn't there more to life? Can't we just pursue what interests us irrespective of gender? Every body is different and unique. Every body has its strengths and weaknesses. If science and medicine had not found a way to transmute her body, how would she have lived her life? Haven't most of us at one time or another wished we were the opposite gender just so we could understand one another or be able to do things that seem unattainable? Don't most people at times feel stuck in a body that feels alien?

I think about all the angst and confusion and cultural rituals that mark puberty. I think about the response to the changes our bodies go through and how those changes mark the paths of our lives. I especially think about the moment of a girl's first menstruation and the awareness that she is now capable of getting pregnant.

During health class at my high school, the teacher gave an assignment to ask our parents what they would do if we got pregnant. I will never forget my dad's initial reaction: "I'll kick that baby out of you." I remember kind of laughing because I'd never seen my dad yell or be angry. Disappointed in my behavior, absolutely. Perturbed, upset, dismayed, worried, but never knee-jerk angry. He

did follow up his graphic declaration with a more thoughtful response. “Your mom and I would listen to what you have to say and then go from there.” When my brother, at the age of 27, announced that his girlfriend of two months was pregnant, the knee-jerk reaction returned, but this time with a different kind of kick: “How stupid can you be? Now you’re trapped. You hardly know this girl.” I’d never seen my dad so disgusted, so displeased, so not in control of his reaction. Before he could call my brother stupid one more time I had to stop his smoke-out-the-ears invectives and take him for a drive to cool down. You can only imagine what it was like a month later when my brother told us his girlfriend was having twins.

Sex. It changes us. Shapes us. Takes us places we never expected to go—like Planned Parenthood.

My first choice of birth control was the diaphragm with a dose of spermicide. Definitely invented by a man. Not fun to maneuver into the vagina, not fun to remove, and then there’s the cleaning. Basically, diaphragms, also known as cervical caps, are a pain in the hoohoo, but better than getting pregnant. The problem is it made me sick. “You could be reacting to the latex. Or maybe it’s the spermicide.” I kept thinking how do women put up with all this. We are putting things into our bodies that don’t belong there coupled with a gel that kills living things. What is this spermicide doing to my living things? What is it doing to my boyfriend’s living thing? You have probably guessed I fared no better with condoms. And, really, sex with condoms? Why bother. No chance I’m trying an IUD. So I settled on the pill. As far as I’m concerned, the birth control pill is the most important invention of the twentieth century—that is, if your body responds favorably and your partner does not lie about his sex life.

The pill does not prevent sexually transmitted diseases. Check. The problem is some STDs are quite clever, they don’t always make their presence known. Take chlamydia for example. Nasty bacteria: *chlamydia trachomatis*. According to the

website STDAware it is one of the most common sexually transmitted bacterial infections on a worldwide level. From 2016 to 2017, according to preliminary CDC figures released August 28, 2018, reported cases of primary and secondary syphilis grew more than 10 percent, chlamydia increased nearly 7 percent, and gonorrhea surged nearly 19 percent. Reported. One of the problems with chlamydia is that it is asymptomatic. Often people do not know they have contracted the infection. For men, no worries. The infection doesn't seem to leave any adverse effects. For women, however, the effects can be devastating, from pelvic inflammatory disease to infertility.

After getting what I thought was a urinary tract infection after a night of very uninspired orgasmless sex, I was diagnosed with chlamydia. Me? STD? Are you sure? What do you know about your partner? Smart, charming, great sense of humor, owns his own company. Studied art history, played professional soccer, travelled all over the world. Tall, blue-eyed, athletic, beautiful olive skin and strong, graceful hands. And, obviously, a LIAR. I had sex with someone whose previous relationships and sexual history I neglected to investigate. I was enchanted, intoxicated, and trusting. I had sex with someone with chlamydia, an STD I had never heard of, and an STD he angrily denied possessing. When I learned that he had a wife in South Africa and a mistress in another city he frequented on business, I could only laugh at his insinuation that I was the carrier. I had been honest. I only had one previous boyfriend and we had both been virgins. Oral sex doesn't count, right?

Chlamydia and the medical profession hijacked my life. Because the first round of antibiotics didn't quite work I spent five years in post-STD hell. After six doctors, rounds of varying antibiotics, the development of a cyst on my ovary, a week's stay at the hospital plugged into to an intravenous antibiotic drip and subjected to a daily pelvic exam, a laparoscopy, and a rigid, lactose-free, high fiber diet to restore intestinal peristalsis that had been decimated by all the

antibiotics, believing the sexual history and health of my partner would have to be proved. No tests, no sex. And no more Lotharios.

My foray with chlamydia happened to coincide with the emergence of the AIDS epidemic. When I said I'd never heard of chlamydia, Dr. Number One wasn't surprised and was very open about what was not being reported about STDs. "We are seeing so many new and different kinds of venereal infections we don't even have names for them." I was horrified by her admission. Then she gave me a safe sex card. I was too embarrassed to admit I was unfamiliar with some of the behaviors listed on the unsafe side of the card. When I showed the card with the list of unsafe sex practices (Golden Showers, Fisting, Coprophilia, Bestiality, Promiscuity, Unprotected anal and vaginal sex) to a gay friend and he told me what they consisted of, I wanted to put my hands over my ears. I wanted to stay ignorant, naive, clueless. Yet it made me wonder if the evolution of monogamy and the illegality of homosexuality had its roots in promiscuity and venereal disease—as well as patriarchy. It certainly reinforced why condoms can be traced to the outbreak of syphilis in the fifteenth century. I recently read Rene Denfeld's "The Enchanted" with its story of a prisoner on death row born with congenital syphilis. It made me wonder how many other lives have been hijacked by venereal disease. VanGogh? Toulouse-Lautrec? Manet? Baudelaire? Poe? Joyce? Lenin? Mussolini? Hitler? And all the unnamed prostitutes, wives and unsuspecting women and children. Recently I've noted the news is filled with reports documenting the rise of the antibiotic resistance to gonorrhoea, chlamydia and syphilis. This is not new. My doctors were telling me this 35 years ago. And yet movies and television shows still portray sexual experimentation and promiscuity as if there are no serious health consequences. And I've yet to see a menopausal woman complain about pain with sexual intercourse or a man tell his wife to bump up the lubrication.

Recently I became a fan of the TNT series “The Closer,” streaming all six seasons in less than a month. Yeah! A 40-something woman who supervises an elite squad of male detectives and who does not apologize for her intelligence or her power. Yet Brenda Lee Johnson as portrayed by Kyra Sedgwick has foibles, my favorite being her love of ding-dongs and ho-hos. In season three, I almost fell out of my chair when the storyline featured Brenda having hot flashes and mood swings—and denial. When she finally makes her way to the doctor and is informed that she’s experiencing “early onset menopause” and hears the list of symptoms—hot flashes, cramps, weight gain, water retention, night sweats, premature wrinkling, and mood swings, she cries “I’m too young.” What I immediately noticed was that dryness and pain with sex were not on the list. Guess it’s the dirty little secret of menopause even Kyra Sedgwick and the writers of “The Closer” did not want to disclose. However, I was grateful to see a character on television experiencing menopausal symptoms sympathetically rather than as the butt of a joke. I even learned something. Brenda’s early onset menopause may have been triggered by benign growths on her ovaries, which, the doctor tells her, can be treated and possibly stave off symptoms until menopause “would naturally occur.” Brenda seems hopeful. Modern medicine to the rescue—until she hears she has to say good-bye to her beloved sugar, take ovulation induction medication and get her ovaries drilled. The scene is played humorously but also realistically and captured how absurd and upsetting “not being in control of your body” is for women experiencing menopause.

At the age of 44 I finally met a man I wanted to grow old with. He was smart and funny. He was ambitious but also loved just hiding out and watching movies or going for walks or reading. He was curious and resourceful, a true Renaissance man. A photographer, a filmmaker, a musician, a writer, an artist and a gardener. He cycled and snowboarded, worked as a journalist and DJ and made the best old world bread I had ever topped with a poached egg. He was not one to

hesitate if he wanted to do something or make something or learn something. The only drawback: he was 24.

When one day at the age of 48 my rose petal labia and silky vagina turned against me and sex became "knife in the vagina" painful, I made an appointment at the local clinic. What's wrong with me? Nothing. Welcome to menopause. Here's some \$90.00 estrogen cream that should help. When I returned home I called my mom. Did you ever experience pain with sex? She didn't know what I was talking about. Lucky woman. Then I remembered that she had a hysterectomy in her 40s and was probably prescribed some kind of hormone treatment. Her only complaint was that since my father's quadruple by-pass he wasn't interested in sex, information I did not really want to know.

My friends, however, shared different stories. Dryness. "Pain worse than childbirth." Loss of desire. Depression. Divorce. A feeling of betrayal by one's body. "It's not like my ability to have orgasms has disappeared. My husband and I just have to be more creative, which isn't a bad thing." Right. But most of us talked about missing the feeling of having our partner inside us, and, conversely, about how sex is no longer that important in our lives. "I'd much rather read a good book."

Menopause doesn't just signal the end of fertility, it signals the end of youth. When I was in my early 30s a friend who was in her late 40s told me a story about her visit to the art studio of a glass blower, an attractive man about her age. After he demonstrated his technique my friend, who was also a practicing artist, engaged him in conversation. A young woman who was also visiting the studio joined the conversation and she immediately gained the glass blower's attention though she had nothing to say. At that moment my friend felt that she was no longer a desirable female, that she had crossed the line to crone even though her conversational skills and curiosity were much more interesting and nuanced. I have played and watched this story many, many times. Once I was

the young woman, now I am sometimes the glass blower and sometimes the crone.

Menopause. It changes us. Shapes us. It taught me things about my body and our culture only experience teaches. It taught me that this “change of life” is different for every woman, that it is a topic most women don’t talk about, and that vaginas are becoming medicalized, something to fix, something to “rejuvenate.” It also taught me that our culture sees aging and a loss of sexual desire as a disease.

I have rejected all efforts to medicalize my aging vagina. No creams. No hormone replacement therapy. No anti-depressants. And no vaginal rejuvenation surgeries: no labiaplasty, clitoral hood reduction, vaginoplasty or whatever else cosmetic surgeons invent. My wet, wild, silky, sexy, supple, sweet-loving vagina is no longer 16 or 28 or 35 or 47. It is as old as I am and I’ve decided to keep it that way, even if it means modifying my sex life or choosing not to have one.

When my young man and I moved in together for what I thought would be the rest of my life, I did not know that my vagina would one day reject his penis. I lived under the belief that older women enjoy sex more because the worry of getting pregnant was off the table. Why was I so woefully misinformed? When I heard women complain about dryness I just assumed it was because of a lack of foreplay or inconsiderate lovers. Diane and Alicia in “The Good Wife” never seemed to have any problems. Nor did Meryl Streep in “It’s Complicated” or Diane Keaton in “Something’s Gotta Give.” Or any older woman portraying a healthy sexual relationship. But maybe they were lucky like my mother.

Even though my young man was a very considerate lover, I now understand why younger man/older woman relationships are more rare. Mine did not survive. And though I miss his companionship, it is my belief that enjoying sex while one is young and silky and wet should not be sacrificed.

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