Sleeping Around

Catherine Townsend

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INTRODUCTION

DOUBLE STANDARDS
WHY I SHAG ON THE FIRST DATE

Well, that was four hours of my life that I'll never get back.

My date tonight was a very cute thirty-six-year-old English screenwriter, and I was dressed to kill in a tight black dress and the kind of four-inch heels that were meant to be worn horizontally rather than vertically.

After discussing the mechanics of everything from *South Park* to string theory over two bottles of wine at Les Trois Garcons in east London, he dropped the 'So, how many people have you slept with?' bomb. I tried to be vague, but he insisted that honesty was very important to him.

'No, really, tell me,' he pleaded, putting his hand on my knee. 'I'll bet I can guess, six?' In a moment of temporary insanity, I forgot that for men, the only 'honest' answer about sexual history involves the phrase, 'Yes, you're the biggest and best I've ever had!'

'Add a zero to that number, honey, and you'll be in the ballpark.' I smiled sweetly, involuntarily raising my left eyebrow.

'Are you serious?' He paled visibly. After too much red wine, the looming taxidermy on the wall was beginning to look rather sinister. Even the dead moose appeared to be judgemental.

'I don't know why you sound so surprised. I mean you are talking to a girl who just spent the afternoon fellating an

aubergine.' I explained that I'd had an oral sex masterclass as part of my research for an upcoming column, and threw in what I thought were a few amusing anecdotes.

But he didn't even try to laugh; instead, he paid the bill and fled into the night.

Back at home, I pulled on my writing uniform – the torn, drawstring-waist tracksuit pants that I've had for the past decade with 'Rock Star' printed in tiny rhinestones on the back, fuzzy leopard-print house slippers whose soles are starting to peel off and a Hanes paper-thin men's cotton tank top.

Judging by my emails, most readers like to imagine that a sex columnist would lounge around in a red silk negligee and furry, high-heeled, slip-on mules. But I save my risqué outfits for dates. Not that any of my underwear got a workout tonight. Some readers even refer to me as a 'posh tart', which I find hilarious since, as an American living in London, I'm actually an outsider. I'm from the Deep South, so I spent my childhood playing near trailer parks, not polo fields.

I headed to the refrigerator in search of a Diet Coke. As usual, we've got slim pickings in our kitchenette – two unopened bottles of champagne from a recent film after-party, a half-eaten jar of Nutella and a loaf of wheat-free bread that looks as if it's growing a winter coat.

Our kitchen is a culinary wasteland. Last week, in a moment of optimism, I decided to heat ready-made soup. The stove wouldn't fire up, so I had to call the gas-man. He got a good laugh out of the fact that I had lived here for six months without realising that the gas wasn't connected.

'Hey, baby! How did the date go?' My flatmate Victoria, who's also my best friend, was curled up on the couch watching *Dangerous Liaisons*. In the buttery light from our living room lamp, I could see why people mistake Victoria for my sister:

she's five years older, and has the same full lips, hazel eyes and dark hair except that she's five foot two and curvy, and I'm five foot ten and still stuffing my bra.

Sitting down next to her, I told her about my date's disappearing act, because I knew that she would tell me if I'd been at fault. Victoria is the 'fat trousers' friend who I'll ask for an opinion before I buy because, with both clothes and men, she's brutally honest. I love her for the fact that she isn't afraid to tell me the truth.

'God, that's so stupid,' she said, shaking her head. 'I can't believe that there are guys out there who are still so scared of a woman with a bit of experience. She paused. "Then again, maybe women are to blame as well. I've known girls who would go home with a guy they'd slept with before just to avoid upping their numbers. What kind of warped moral logic is that?"

'I know! I read in the *New Scientist* that the national average was nine partners. But the interesting thing is, once the women knew they were attached to a lie detector, they doubled their numbers.'

'Well Cat, there is an old saying: "women halve their number, and men double it" And you have to admit, there is a definite double standard. A woman who has loads of sexual partners is still seen as a slapper, while guys who hook up constantly are considered studs.'

'I think that's crazy. We've had the sexual revolution – women should feel free to date and have sex like men. Men have always been permitted to sleep around until they find 'The One' so why do women still have to feel sensitive about 'The List'?

'You're right,' Victoria said. But then a cheeky smile spread across her face: 'though to be honest, I'm occasionally tempted to edit some things out! Like I don't really add anything that lasted under 30 seconds to my list.'

I laughed as we started to debate what else 'doesn't really count'. Mutual masturbation in the back of a cab? Unreciprocated oral sex? Women?

Then there's the fact that my memory gets fuzzier with time. These days I tend only to remember the really good, the really bad and the really bizarre.

Victoria echoed my thoughts: 'It's getting harder to keep track as I get older. Have you ever tried to make a list of everyone you've ever shagged, as research or something?'

I giggled. 'That's what I do instead of counting sheep.'

'You still can't sleep? Cat, let me give you some pills. I'm sure I've got some knocking around in my handbag somewhere.' Victoria is a walking pharmacy, but she knows that I don't even take paracetamol. Caffeine is my drug of choice.

'No thanks,' I told her. 'I've got to push through this. When my body needs sleep, it will get it. Then again, that's what I said about sex.'

'Whatever, darling. See you in the morning, then?'

I blew her a kiss and went into my closet-sized bedroom, allowing my mind to wander. I was disappointed about tonight. But it wasn't the first time that my sexual frankness had got me into trouble.

I still remember my first sexual fantasy, which happened when I was five years old while my teacher was reading the Cinderella fairy tale in class.

Always a precocious child, I waited until she got to the 'and they lived happily ever after' part to raise my hand and ask, 'So does that mean they are going to take their shirts off and get into bed to kiss?' She made me sit in the corner and called me a bad girl, which I also quite enjoyed.

A few days after that, my best friend Whitney and I found ourselves in a standoff over Barbie dolls. 'I want the dream

house,' she said, 'because my Barbie is married and has three children.'

'Fine,' I shot back. 'My Barbie is rich and famous and has two Kens, so I only want the Corvette.' I'm afraid that, like my miniature plastic counterpart, not much has changed for me since then. Whitney's Barbies baked cookies and sang songs. My Barbie dolls spent most nights in a pornographic tableau despite the absence of discernible genitalia. As for Rock Star Ken, I always suspected that his tight shiny pink shirts and studded earrings conveyed homo-erotic undertones.

I fished out a mauled Marlboro Light from the bottom of my handbag, and was about to start on this week's column, but first I cracked open the window and attempted to check out my hot neighbour with amazing pecs. Fortunately for me, he tends to walk around shirtless. Unfortunately, he's had the bad manners to put up curtains. Spoilsport. I curled up under the duvet with my laptop and began to type.

I read somewhere that men think about sex every seven seconds. This sounds about right to me, because I'm so often horny that I end up having sex on the first date. So do several of my girlfriends.

Some people are horrified by women admitting to the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure for its own sake. Yet most of my male friends seem to think that they will sleep around and have adventures until the right girl comes along. So why should women be any different?

Which is why I was so surprised to see the results of a recent University of Sheffield study that said nine out of ten women believe that casual sex is immoral. Apparently, single women rarely have sex for physical pleasure, but rather as a result of their quest to meet a long-term partner.

Besides, why do the two have to be mutually exclusive? With a few exceptions, most of my serious relationships have started

out as one-night stands where the chemistry between us was too great to ignore.

I've never understood those people who say, 'It all comes down to compatibility and good conversation' when it comes to finding a soulmate. Of course I want those things, but I also need passion, love and gut-wrenching, mind-blowing orgasms. On the occasions when I click with someone, I would rather find out on date two than date twenty that we're not sexually compatible. If I just want a sympathetic ear, I'll ring my mum.

Still unable to sleep, I called my friend Michael, a fellow night owl, to get some insight. Michael and I hooked up several times early in our friendship, which I think made us much better friends, because we got the sexual tension out of the way early. I trust his judgement about men completely, because as a political journalist he has to constantly determine the meaning behind politicians' words. He's a serial monogamist who lately seems to have been leaving a long time between girlfriends, because his standards are so exacting.

'It's premature intimacy that's the problem, not premature nakedness,' he said. 'If I'm into a girl, I'm going to call her again, period. I don't like people who set up artificial barriers, like I think the whole "Ooh, I can't do it on the second date but on the third is fine" is bullshit. It shows that she doesn't have enough self-confidence, which is the real turn-off. But, Cat, it's almost 2:00 a.m.; are you sure this is just about an article?'

I had to laugh, because even though I'd mentioned the piece, he knew me well enough to guess that something was up.

I exhaled slowly, and dropped my cigarette butt into the remnants of my soda can. 'Okay, well. I had another bad date tonight.'

'What happened this time?'

'He asked me how many people I slept with, and I was honest. Do you think it's a deal-breaker?'

'Frankly, Cat, I don't see how it's any of his business.'

'That's what I thought! But I guess I'm just wondering when I'm going to find a man who can handle me. I mean, I'm smart, funny and reasonably attractive, so why is the fact that I can deep-throat an aubergine a hindrance?'

'Well I can tell you that the thought of you sexually molesting a vegetable is a serious turn-on for most of the male population. I think it's probably more about him than you; you know, the idea that some guy somewhere along the line is better than him.'

'You have a point,' I admitted, thinking back to an ex-boyfriend who found out that I once dated a semi-famous Manhattan photographer known as The Horse, and not for his equestrian abilities. I never heard the end of it.

'Then again, sleeping with a sex columnist is a bit intimidating, kind of like performing open-heart surgery on a cardiologist,' he continued. 'Maybe men *are* afraid of your experience. Or the fact that you're this feisty, outspoken American who also happens to be very tall in heels. The combination *is* pretty terrifying.'

'It cuts both ways, you know! I sometimes worry that they are going to expect me to morph into some kind of sexual superwoman.'

He laughed. 'Well, sweetheart, I think you kind of are. You're definitely, shall we say, very imaginative.'

I stifled a giggle as I looked down at my faded grey tank top and baggy tracksuit.

'Yeah, right, I'm looking seriously hot now,' I laughed as I made a face at myself in the mirror. My hair was messily piled

on top of my head in a faux-denim scrunchie that hadn't seen the light of day since the mid eighties

'Anyway, if I am considered hot, I deserve to be after the crap I took in primary school. The cheerleaders were all so cute, and I looked like some kind of freak.'

That was putting it mildly: In a school where the kids' idea of fashion forward was wearing a shirt that had buttons, I wore mesh tops and silver ballet flats. I was teased mercilessly, and nicknamed Alien Girl because of my height and wide-spaced eyes.

'You're lucky babe, you bypassed the "cute" stage completely and went straight from being an ugly duckling to sex kitten,' he said. 'I'll bet those cheerleaders all weigh twenty stone, have five kids and live in trailer parks right now.'

I laughed. 'Thanks, Michael. I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay?'

'Sure thing. Sweet dreams.'

Fat chance. On the rare occasions when I actually do sleep I have incredibly vivid dreams. Which wouldn't be so bad, except that lately they are erotic dreams, about Gordon Brown. I shudder to think what fucked-up things must be happening in my subconscious to bring that on.

So I pulled out a yellow legal pad and tried to make a list of all my previous shags. The earliest entries were highly detailed, while later ones were full of holes ('Number 24: Jon or Joe?? Photographer With Nice teeth). My eyes soon blurred, and I debated whether to download some Internet porn, but I'm paranoid about giving my credit card number out online and inviting tons of spam.

Besides, the media players giving free previews aren't that compatible with my Mac, and I feared I would end up with a bunch of jerky footage of thirty-five-year-old 'teenagers' having 'first-time' lesbian experiences. At that time of night. I usually

preferred online erotic stories, which I have put neatly into labelled folders on my laptop: straight, gay, group, etc. But not tonight – I was too tired for any elaborate fantasies.

So I licked my fingers and slid my hand between my legs to massage my clitoris in quick deliberate pulses. The thought of my neighbour, peeping through his curtains to watch me, getting hard and moving his hands down his rippled stomach to stroke his cock, watching me watching him, did the trick. It only took about ninety seconds.

Lying in bed afterwards, recovering, I thought about how much I've learned since I came to the UK and began the sex column, and how each date – the good, the bad and the ugly, has taught me more about what I want in a partner.

It's been an emotional and physical rollercoaster, but what doesn't kill me will ultimately make me stronger. And it's going to take a lot more than an idiot like the one tonight to break me.

It would be fantastic if any of my casual partners turned out to be the love of my life. But if not, I'll still respect them all in the morning.

As I drifted off to sleep, I spurned Gordon's invasion of my REM sleep and started thinking about how my career as a sex columnist began.