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Fictions of Sexuality
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Europe, Netherlands, Amsterdam
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Abstract

I conducted a Creative Independent Study Project and wrote two short stories that include themes of women's sexual desire/pleasure, sexual debuts, masturbation, discoveries, and understandings of one's sexuality. Because women receive so many messages about keeping their chastity and so few about pursuing the pleasures sex can provide, the opportunities to promote the exploration of women's sexual desire cannot be missed. To write my stories and answer my research question, I read and watched a variety of both academic and creative materials. I wanted to do this work because these are the stories I needed in high school when I was discovering my sexuality. This creative writing based on theoretical understandings of a topic is something I have wanted to produce for a few years, and which I hope will continue to be a part of my creative writing process. Over the course of this project, I have learned that I am capable of writing multi-layered short stories with an actual plotline, something that was not the case even a few months ago. The more frequently female sexual desires and experiences are placed in a spotlight and given voices, the less taboo they will be and the easier it will be to discuss these topics, which can only be good for everyone.

Keywords: English Literature, Gender Studies, Language and Literature

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Introduction

For my final project, I conducted a Creative Independent Study Project and wrote two short stories that include themes of women's sexual desire/pleasure, sexual debuts, masturbation, discoveries, and understandings of one's sexuality. That is admittedly a long list of topics, but they are in many ways inseparably intertwined and therefore easily layered within stories. Within our lives, we do not understand these topics within individual vacuums, and neither should the stories we read.

Part of the significance of this work is that it looks positively at topics that are often associated with bad events or actions. Many stories show men experiencing the above topics in a positive light, but women in those stories are often used as foils, threats, warnings, comic relief, or antagonists. Another part of the significance of this work is its accessibility. Academic literature on these topics is not always easy to read or even to access, and creative literature is usually easier to find and understand. In addition, during this time of diversification in literature, debates on women's sexuality, and misunderstandings of labels, identities, attractions, and acts, creative work is even more necessary for its abilities to be non-threatening, immersive, and unassuming.

I am interested in these topics because of the understandings I formed of my sexuality during childhood and how they have changed since then. I understood masturbation as something only men *could* do, let alone should do, and virginity until marriage necessary to retain any respect from other people or even from myself. It took time to unlearn those teachings, and I had to do it from primarily theoretical (and heteronormative) readings. One piece of advice given to writers is, "Write the story you needed when you were younger," and another is, "Write from a

place of empathy, not experience.” I intended to utilize both of these pieces of advice in my stories.

It is important to research and write about the above-listed topics because people should have access to more information, more representation in literature, and more stories. This work is important to everyone because it affects everyone. How we understand our sexuality and the sexuality of those around us affects how we treat them both in public and in private, and how they will go on to treat others.

This work and the resulting stories might benefit others in the future by giving them more diverse and nuanced perspectives on sexuality that are not simply based on the label someone uses and stereotypical understandings of that label. The work may also produce conversations about sexuality that decrease stigmatization around it and opens people up to more empathetic viewpoints of the world. Ultimately, however, I want women to see that their sexual desires matter and can be empowering.

Literature Review

Virginity is a divisive subject in much of the world, and how someone feels about it cannot always be determined by where they live or how they were raised.¹ While someone’s sexual debut is often considered a private matter, a lot of research has been conducted on the topic and its impact on society.² A woman’s virginity is often more conflict-inducing than a man’s because she is expected to keep hers while he is expected to lose his. Because women receive so many messages about keeping their chastity and so few about pursuing the pleasures

¹ I will often use the term “sexual debut” over virginity because of rhetoric around the “loss” of virginity being a complicated issue and the inability of anyone but the person themselves to identify when they have had sex.

² As a note, this paper speaks primarily of cisgender/heterosexual people because it is these identities that much of the main literature assumes. Separate work will be done on queer virginity.

sex can provide, the opportunities to promote the exploration of women's sexual desire cannot be missed. My work lies at the crossroads of lesbian young adult literature and women's sexual desire and pleasure.

Lesbian Young Adult Literature

One element of my work is its inclusion within the genre of young adult literature (YAL). Literature intended for children began appearing after the Industrial Revolution because reform laws requiring education lead to wide-spread literacy.³ With S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* and novels like it, the now booming genre of YAL was created.⁴ The arguments for the function of this genre include enticing teenagers (who might otherwise be reluctant) to read,⁵ and empowering those teenagers by giving them role models of their age category who overcome various realistic and magical challenges.⁶ It is the second function of YAL in which I am primarily interested for these stories. My work features women in their late teens exploring their sexuality and feeling empowered in it, following traditions laid out in YAL. I want to take these teenage characters, and the possible teenage readers, seriously in their ability to have complicated lives and problems.

The second element of my work is its place in lesbian literature, which is any creative writing piece about a women-loving-woman (wlw). The tricky thing about lesbian literature is that "the best work in lesbian studies currently takes place not in literary criticism but in film and cultural criticism, or in poststructuralist and psycho-analytic theory," which perhaps

³ Shireen Campbell, ENG 110: Growing Up American, Fall 2017.

⁴ Chris Crowe, "Young Adult Literature: What Is Young Adult Literature?," *The English Journal* 88, no. 1 (1998): 120–22, <https://doi.org/10.2307/821448>. 121.

⁵ Crowe. 121.

⁶ Belinda Y. Louie and Douglas H. Louie, "Empowerment through Young-Adult Literature," *The English Journal* 81, no. 4 (1992): 53–56, <https://doi.org/10.2307/819931>. 53.

demonstrates that there is little lesbian literature to critique.⁷ The well-known written work on lesbians primarily resides in erotic/less-than-literary novels,⁸ in classics that could not be explicit but are read as lesbianist in intention by literary critics,⁹ and (more recently) in young adult fiction.¹⁰ Hugh Stevens explains in “Contemporary Gay and Lesbian Fiction in English” that early lesbian work often had tragic themes and tragic endings, or if not tragic, then only cautiously hopeful.¹¹ Lesbian literature began appearing before the Stonewall Riots, though they were often classified as lurid pulp fiction novels despite their complexity because the included homosexuality made them unfit for the literary canon. After the Riots, more lesbian books were allowed to join the canon, though slowly and often still only recognized as containing gay sex, rather than more complex themes of classism, racism, and culture. Today’s lesbian literature is moving beyond using the tragic endings of wlw characters as a warning or threat as to the dangers of stepping outside of the patriarchy and moving toward wlw characters who are celebrated and whose sexuality is worth more than being a warning or threat.¹² My work is intended to fit into the latter category while acknowledging that operating outside of the heteronormative patriarchy is nigh impossible, especially for teenagers, and that even laying claim to tabooed sexuality is a form of resistance.

⁷ Colleen Lamos, “Charting the Waters of Lesbian Literature,” ed. Karla Jay, Joanne Glasgow, and Bonnie Zimmerman, *Contemporary Literature* 34, no. 2 (1993): 304–12, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1208553>. 305/

⁸ “The Lesbian Review,” *The Lesbian Review*, accessed November 29, 2019, <https://www.thelesbianreview.com/>.

⁹ Lamos, “Charting the Waters of Lesbian Literature.” 304-305.

¹⁰ Caroline E. Jones, “From Homoplot to Progressive Novel: Lesbian Experience and Identity in Contemporary Young Adult Novels,” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 37, no. 1 (April 21, 2013): 74–93, <https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.2013.0003>. 74.

¹¹ Hugh Stevens, “Contemporary Gay and Lesbian Fiction in English,” *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature*, November 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHO9781139547376.041>.

¹² Thomas Crisp, “From Romance to Magical Realism: Limits and Possibilities in Gay Adolescent Fiction,” *Children’s Literature in Education* 40, no. 4 (June 19, 2009): 333, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-009-9089-9>.

At the intersection of these two threads of sits young adult lesbian literature, for which some literary criticism has been written. Kenneth Kidd explains in “Introduction: Lesbian/Gay Literature for Children and Young Adults” that the YAL genre was perhaps the most welcoming of lesbian and gay themes “because coming out is often described as the idiom of adolescence as an intense period of sexual attraction, social rebellion, and personal growth.”¹³ Catherine E. Jones also explores the connections between YAL and lesbian literature and states, “empowering young female protagonists as sexual agents helps them become agents in the adult world.”¹⁴ She posits that this is particularly true for young lesbians who must find their way in a world that often does not accept them. In “‘I will not be a 17 year old virgin’: Female Virginitude and Sexual Scripting in Graphic Narratives for Teenagers,” Christine N. Stamper and Mollie V. Blackburn look at four graphic narratives - Daniel Clowes’ *Ghost World*, Sarah Oleksyk’s *Ivy*, Ariel Schrag’s *Potential*, and Julie Maroh’s *Blue is the Warmest Color* - for how they support and subvert the sexual script given to teenage girls. The study concludes, “Through these graphic narratives, spaces are opened for teen readers to see alternative views of self-pleasure and queer sexualities that are valid and valuable.”¹⁵ They acknowledged, however, that “While showing a more progressive view of sex and virginity than much of YAL, these graphic narratives still show room to improve in order for scripting and stereotypes that perpetuate potentially harmful ideologies to be subverted.”¹⁶ Katy Stein’s “‘My Slippery Place’: Female Masturbation in Young Adult Literature” discusses how adult authors use masturbation in their novels to teach their

¹³ Kenneth Kidd, “Introduction: Lesbian/Gay Literature for Children and Young Adults,” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (1998): 114–19, <https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.0.1284>. 114.

¹⁴ Jones, “From Homoplot to Progressive Novel.”

¹⁵ Christine N. Stamper and Mollie V. Blackburn, “‘I Will Not Be a 17 Year Old Virgin’: Female Virginitude and Sexual Scripting in Graphic Narratives for Teenagers.,” *Journal of Graphic Novels & Comics* 10, no. 1 (February 2019): 47–66. PAGE NUMBER

¹⁶ Stamper and Blackburn. PAGE NUMBER

young readers lessons. These lessons include that masturbation should be used to practice and prepare for sex with a man or that those who masturbate just because it feels good are abnormal. I agree with Stein's analysis of the works she picked, but I was interested in writing pieces that ultimately contradict her thesis by having sympathetic characters who masturbate for pleasure and not for practice. In other words, I want to start filling the void that Stamper and Blackburn identify as the literature that does not rely on harmful ideologies and stereotypes.

Women's Sexual Desire and Pleasure

Women often experience desire and pleasure differently than men. These different experiences are partially influenced by differences in anatomy and partially by the messages women receive regarding their sexual desires. There are two elements I find particularly important to women's sexual desire and pleasure: sexual debuts (a.k.a. losing one's virginity) and masturbation.

One element of the first is covered when Amanda N. Gesselman, Gregory D. Webster, and Justin R. Garcia report their research on the effects of late sexual debuts in "Has Virginity Lost Its Virtue? Relationship Stigma Associated With Being a Sexually Inexperienced Adult."¹⁷ The study finds that those between the ages of 25 and 45 in America who are still sexually inexperienced "may perceive themselves as stigmatized and that they may not be desired as romantic partners, even by those who themselves are sexually inexperienced."¹⁸ This suggests a change in society's sexual script from valuing virginity/chastity in a romantic/sexual partner to valuing experience/knowledge. I am interested in this idea of sexual experience for the questions it raises: What kinds of sex and between whom counts as experience? Does masturbation count

¹⁷ Amanda N. Gesselman, Gregory D. Webster, and Justin R. Garcia, "Has Virginity Lost Its Virtue? Relationship Stigma Associated With Being a Sexually Inexperienced Adult.," *Journal of Sex Research* 54, no. 2 (February 2017): 202–13.

¹⁸ Gesselman, Webster, and Garcia.

as sexual experience? How does someone now determine they want or are ready for sex before marriage while making sure they have not been pressured by outside forces? These are questions I thought about while writing my stories because a change in society's sexual script opens up room for new motivations of characters.

They are questions Peggy Orenstein also considers in "What Young Women Believe About Their Own Sexual Pleasure." She calls for opening the discussion for what happens after the "yes" of consent so people can have more ethical and enjoyable sex.¹⁹ She shares that young women feel entitled to engage in sexual behavior, but don't necessarily feel entitled to enjoy it, and that they gauge their sexual satisfaction by whether or not their partner had an orgasm (whereas men gauge it on their own orgasm). Orenstein goes on to explain that women consider their genitals to be both icky and sacred, but that how women think of their genitalia is directly linked to how much they enjoy sex. She points out that our lack of ability to name the body parts of women make them unspeakable and shameful, which leads to a lack of masturbation among teenage girls (fewer than half do it), which means women do not know what they want in bed, do not know how to ask for it, and therefore are less likely to orgasm. Her takeaway is that "intimate justice" (that sex has political as well as personal implications) needs to be considered as we move forward in how we talk about sex with teenagers so the messages they receive are not about the risks and dangers, but rather about both responsibility and joy. I aim to present stories that show women exploring and discovering what they want in bed as well as in life.

Sofia Jawed-Wessel's *Women's Sexual Pleasure: What are We so Afraid Of?*²⁰ is about how we view pregnant women and what we think about them having sex, and what that says

¹⁹ *What Young Women Believe about Their Own Sexual Pleasure* | Peggy Orenstein, accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWA2uL8zXPI&t=1s>.

about how we view all women's sexual desire.²⁰ She discusses objectification and how pregnant women are labeled as cute, but sex with them is seen as gross or difficult. These women (particularly poor women and women of color) are also not trusted to make their own decisions about their body or child, which can be seen when doctors don't tell women they can drink in moderation while pregnant or say that sex during pregnancy "isn't worth the risk." Phrases of control like these – told to women throughout their lives – tell women that their sexual pleasure does not matter. This means that any time a woman has sex just because it feels good, it is revolutionary, and she is scary because this means she prioritizes herself. Jawed-Wessel's final recommendations are to stop telling women what they can and can't do with their body, prioritize your female partner's pleasure, admit that most people have sex because it feels good, and support comprehensive sex education that doesn't shame teenagers. My work aims to interrupt the messages women receive about their sexual pleasure by showing characters who have sex because it feels good and prioritize it because they want it.

Pam Costa's discusses her struggles with her lack of sexual desire and the negative messages she and other women receive as children that make them not want to have sex in "Reclaiming Female Sexual Desire."²¹ She shares how talking to her friends about her and their sexual desires was a major turning point in her journey to increase her desire. These conversations lead her to become a researcher on the effects of support groups on female sexual desire. She found that overall sexual function increases by about twenty percent after four weekly meetings. The conclusion she draws from this is that when women gain communication skills with friends about sex, those skills translate into conversations with their partners and their

²⁰ *Women's Sexual Pleasure: What Are We so Afraid of?* | Sofia Jawed-Wessel | TEDxOmaha, accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=paiRIkWVy0o>.

²¹ *Reclaiming Female Sexual Desire* | Pam Costa | TEDxPaloAlto, accessed November 19, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Sn_UhcXZm4.

children. I hope my work leads to readers having conversations with their friends and partners about sex, or at least start to consider what messages they've received and what messages they want to pass on to the next generation about sex, self-pleasure, and sexual debuts.

In "Masturbation is the New Meditation," Keeley Olivia shares her path to using self-pleasure as part of her self-care, learning how to have relaxed orgasms lead to nourishing and meditative effects, and setting goals resulted in life-changing orgasms.²² As an experiment, she masturbated an hour a day five times a week for a year. She started with only clitoral stimulation but exploring her vagina in search of a cervical orgasm allowed her to learn that her vagina was not the gross thing lifelong messages told her it was. She concludes that a woman's vast orgasmic variety both exists and matters. My work promotes the empowerment of women through sexual exploration by depicting other women doing the same, working toward normalizing these actions and experiences.

Conclusion

It is important to start telling young adults that their sexual desires and pleasures are okay, no matter what their orientation or gender is. It is also important to promote masturbation and other means of safe sex so they can explore in healthy ways. While people lecture and write academically on the topics included in my work, there is always room for more creative work. Stories are a more accessible mode of conveying information and ideas because they require access to far less. Creative work also allows us to question the ways we see the world in a non-threatening manner and open the minds of people to ideas they may not have considered. Women's sexual desire can be a divisive topic, but empathetic storytelling will build bridges every day.

²² *Masturbation Is the New Meditation* | Keeley Olivia | TEDxLeamingtonSpa, accessed November 19, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BUOzUTXFIQA>.

Methods and Methodology

To write my stories and answer my research question, I read and watched a variety of both academic and creative materials. My research question was, “How do people understand their sexuality? How does that understanding affect how they interact with others?”

Source Material

My intended actions in answering my research question were to read academic literature on the topic – both from queer theory and literary criticism perspectives – and conduct interviews with individuals in Amsterdam. While the first action was accomplished, the second was not because I had underestimated the time it would take to read and write for this project. I also, admittedly, was not sure how to do about interviews when I had no target interviewee or community.

My readings comprised of both queer theory and literary criticism. The first category was included to gain an understanding of how my chosen themes operate in the world but also are questioned by theorists. The second category was included because I felt that if I wanted to make a meaningful impact within my chosen genres, I needed to understand what people were doing well and what needed to be improved.

Among my readings, I also watched TED Talks by women whose own experiences with their sexualities led them to work in the field. These were important to me because they allowed me to step outside of the usual realm of academia (the essay) and see what other ways people shared their knowledge and experiences with the world.

In addition to academic materials, I read a variety of short stories. Some of these stories were recommended to me by my advisor and others I found on my own. I had to find the balance

between using these stories as examples/inspiration and not allowing these stories to influence my own. I feel I did a good job of keeping the balance intact.

Artistic Medium

I have been writing since I was ten years old and it is what I want to do with my life, so it felt natural to choose creative writing for my final project. I love stories and consider myself a storyteller through many mediums, but the ability of the written word to be accessed by so many people around the world is particularly appealing. Prose is my preferred medium, so I stuck with what was comfortable. Because of the time constraint, I decided to write a few short stories. This allowed me to give multiple perspectives both within one work and across a couple of works.

Positionality

I came into this study with a rather privileged background: I was born and raised in the American middle class, educated in a private middle and high school, and then in a private college. I am white and cisgender, which is a privileged position, though also a woman and lesbian, which I feel makes me more empathetic to other minority groups than I might otherwise be. It is with the perspective created by these identities and experiences that I enter all written work and physical spaces, and this creative project is no different.

Limitations

The characters in my stories all share at least something with me, especially gender and sexuality. These identities were intentional because it is the sexuality of women that much of society finds threatening and so what I wanted to focus on, and there seems to be little literary realism about lesbians, bi women, or women-loving-women (wlw).²³ These are also the identities with which I have the most experience, and the constraint allowed me to explore

²³ There is, however, much genre fiction or erotica, of which I was conscious. I intentionally worked to avoid making these stories into erotica and instead make space in literary works for lesbians and wlw.

various personalities and circumstances. These choices in the gender and sexuality of my characters also create a limitation on the study, but I used that limitation to fuel my research by giving it direction. Many authors intentionally create constraints to force themselves to be more creative within the space they have allowed themselves, and I wanted to engage in that process as well.

Explanation of Creative Work

My creative work consists of two short stories. To write them, I was inspired by what I know about women's sexual desire/pleasure, sexual debuts, masturbation, discoveries, and understandings of one's sexuality. I wanted to do this work because these are the stories I needed in high school when I was discovering my sexuality. I received many of the negative messages other women receive around our sexual desires, but perhaps twice as many as some because I am a lesbian.

My stories focus on sexuality and relate the messages that masturbation is a path toward empowerment and when someone makes their sexual debut should be up to their terms, no matter what age they are or with whom they choose to make it. In addition, all of my characters are women because a plethora of positive stories can be found about men making their sexual debut, but these are often at the expense of the women in the stories. I want to fill in the gap and give women characters to look to for guidance in figuring out their sexual desires and pleasures. Two of my characters are lesbians to continue normalizing lesbianism and take it out of the well-known pornographic context, and one is of unstated sexuality so that any reader could see herself in the character.

I looked at a variety of sources to inform my work, including academic articles, short stories, and TED Talks. I read the academic articles to get a grounding in theory and literary

criticism that I could use in my stories. I read the short stories to understand how other authors have employed my chosen topics in their works. I watched the TED Talks because I wanted to see what information could be found outside of the bounds of traditional academia and how that information was communicated in a way that kept the audience engaged.

My intended audience is women, and particularly young lesbians in need of a message that their sexuality is not dirty, gross, unwanted, ugly, strictly erotic, or any number of other harmful words applied to women's sexual desires. My potential audience includes whoever comes across this paper or my website,²⁴ which is where I intend to publish these stories. I intend to share my website on social media platforms to reach a broader audience. I may also attempt publication on other platforms. The story about Beth and Taylor may also become part of a novel later on in my life – I know I am not done with them yet.

While I have intentions behind these stories, I also understand that authorial intent does not matter once stories are in the hands of the reader. I cannot tell them what I want them to learn, I can only hope they find it in the stories, perhaps in addition to observations I did not even realize were there. No matter what my reader takes away from my stories, however, I hope they are changed.

Analysis and Evaluation

This creative writing based on theoretical understandings of a topic is something I have wanted to produce for a few years, and which I hope will continue to be a part of my creative writing process. For this being the first go of it, I feel I did pretty well. I know some of the

²⁴ Emelyn Schaeffer, "Creative Work," Emelyn Schaeffer: An Introduction, accessed December 1, 2019, <https://www.emelynschaeffer.com/category/creative-work/>.

information I wanted my reader to have was sometimes shared with a clumsy hand, but that gives me room to grow as I move forward in my writing career.

Overall, I think I conveyed my intended messages well and effectively. My goal was to produce writing about sexuality that was more inclusive than the normative understandings, which I think I did through relationships that are not romantically based and sexual debuts that do not focus on the loss of virginity. I see room for more work along these lines and I am looking forward to making more of my own contributions.

I am happy with the artistic merits of my work. I have contributed to lesbian young adult literature without writing erotica and teenage sexual debuts without shaming one of the characters for her decision or using her as the site/sight of a lesson. I know there is always room for growth, and even know I can think of many things I could change in these stories, but that acknowledgment is part of what tells me I am not done with this medium or these topics. I think knowing I intend to write more about Beth and Taylor created a hurdle for myself when writing the story found below because I had to be done with a story I know is not finished. For now, however, I am happy with my contributions and work.

If I had the same amount of time to do the project over again, I would work harder at finding interview subjects. I feel that the perspectives of other people I would have gained would have allowed me to write more nuanced characters and perhaps weave in the stories of other characters. As I have said above, I am not done with these characters or these topics, but further changes and additions will have to be completed outside of the bounds of this topic. Other than this addition of other voices, I feel that I produced the best work I could in the time provided.

Conclusion

Future projects related to my work can include more short stories about female sexual desire, sexual debuts, masturbation, discoveries, and understandings of one's sexuality. Short films, YouTube Series, and longer works like movies or novels would also be good platforms for stories on these topics. The more frequently female sexual desires and experiences are placed in a spotlight and given voices, the less taboo they will be and the easier it will be to discuss these topics, which can only be good for everyone.

Over the course of this project, I have learned that I am capable of writing multi-layered short stories with an actual plotline, something that was not the case even a few months ago. Before this project began, I was not sure of my abilities as a writer and storyteller, but I feel much more confident now. The time constraint left me with less time than I would like to rethink stories and edit them, but it also taught me that even stories I can be proud of can be produced in a short time. In the future, I may do quick turn-around edits followed by a long time of not looking at the story before looking at it for edits again. This month has taught me a lot about myself as a writer and I am left grateful for the opportunity it provided.

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Single

Amy had decided to try masturbating on Friday. She'd read about it online, so she knew what she was going to do, or she at least got the general principle.

She locked her dorm room door and put some porn she thought she'd like – a couple who seemed to get themselves off from making these videos – in front of her.

It felt a little awkward at first, touching parts of herself she only really touched in the shower, but with no water this time and way less focus on getting clean. She focused on the two women in the video in front of her while she played with her nipples like one of them was, hoping not thinking about her actions too much would help her get in the mood. After a few minutes, Amy felt the growing warmth in her lower belly travel lower, followed by a throb in her clit. That surprised her, but it felt good, so she chased the feeling.

She moved one of her hands down to her vulva and tried out a few motions – circles, back and forth, up and down – until she figured out what felt best. *No wonder people do this every day*, she thought, laughing to herself. When she came, Amy felt like she floated off of the bed for the whole thing.

When she opened her eyes again, she was still floating – about a foot above the bed and seemingly without any way to come down.

After she finally landed back on her bed and went to the bathroom, Amy typed, “Superpowers appearing overnight?” into Google and hit “enter.” All that came up, though, was a video about how sleeping was a superpower and articles about what would happen if humans actually did have powers.

“What causes superpowers to appear?” Now it was just things about superpower countries and their effect on world affairs.

“Why am I flying?” produced results on getting over the fear of flying on an airplane.

“I can fly now” only brought up the song “Gonna Fly Now” from *Rocky*.

Amy closed Google and laid back on her bed, thinking about what she could do next.

To make sure it wasn't a fluke she'd just dreamed up in her post-orgasmic state, Amy thought about floating again. Her ceiling moved closer and she tried to keep in a noise that would either be a shriek of fear or laughter and willed herself back down. Wanting to see how far she could push this, she grabbed the side of her bed and floated into the open air next to it, her heart pounding, but she stayed again. Amy then made herself vertical and floated down to the ground.

Laughing, Amy jumped back up into the air and floated around her room. Soon, she was flying up to the ceiling and back down to the floor, jumping off her bed and not worrying about disturbing the people below her with the thud of her feet.

It was during one of her flights around the room that Amy realized she'd forgotten to lock the door again after she came back from the bathroom because her roommate walked in. Sarah stopped and stared up at her.

“You can fly?”

Amy landed and forced a laugh, “What? No, I can't! How much did you have to drink?”

Sarah thought for a moment and then replied, “Enough for me to believe you.”

Amy helped her to bed and then crawled into bed herself, but it took a while for her to fall asleep.

In the morning, Sarah said, “I had this crazy dream last night. You were flying around our room.”

Amy laughed with her and resolved to be more careful about the door in the future.

On Tuesday, Amy double-checked that her door was locked and read erotica instead of watching porn while she touched herself. On Wednesday morning, she discovered that the superpower wasn't always flying when she broke her toothbrush handle while sleepily squeezing it too hard.

On Saturday morning, she listened to a pornographic audio clip. None of the rain hit her on her way to the library from the union even though she had left her umbrella in her room. On the way back to her room, she thought about the rain hitting her and it did.

On Thursday, when she finished trying out her new vibrator, she thought about dying her hair blue, and it was when she looked in the mirror. She ran her hand through the short curls and wished them pink, and they were.

On Monday night, Amy tried a combination of touching her clit and penetrating herself with her fingers, and on Tuesday, she convinced the editor in chief to let her write the next front-page story in the campus newspaper, even though he clearly wanted to do it himself.

On Friday, it was back to flying.

On Monday, Amy requested a single room for the next school year.

Not to Your Face

You're gay, right?

The text popped up on Taylor's phone on Wednesday afternoon from Beth. Not seeing too much harm in it, Taylor replied *yes, i'm a lesbian*. Beth didn't say anything again until Friday night.

You can't tell anyone, but I'm gay, too. Do you want to have sex?

Taylor huffed a surprised laugh while her eyebrows raised and then crinkled together. She didn't know Beth *that* well, having only moved to Lake Oswego a couple of years ago, so it was unexpected to get a text like that after ones only about group projects.

what??

I know you can read what I sent you

Taylor snorted a bit and shot back, *but why are you asking me*

Her phone buzzed with, *If you haven't noticed, the pickings are a little slim at our school.*

I want to have sex, so I thought I'd see if you want to, too

so i'm a last resort

Technically, you're both a first and a last resort

That made Taylor laugh a bit. *that's hot*

Is that a yes or a no?

Taylor quickly considered the pros and cons of the situation. With the end of high school in sight, she wondered if a relationship like this was really what she wanted to get into just before leaving. It would have to end sooner or later, and she didn't want to be crying at the end of it. Though if it was only for the next few months, she considered, and they knew that they

wouldn't get feelings involved. And that would be good because she still wasn't over Samantha, her ex-girlfriend back in San Francisco. They still had that promise to try dating in college if they ended up at the same school, and anything with Beth could feel like cheating. But having sex with Beth wouldn't be dating her, and as she and Samantha weren't together, then it wouldn't actually be cheating. Emotionally, Taylor considered, there was no way to know what she was jumping into and how she would feel about it later, but it could be fun. Besides, it might just be a one-time thing. Beth hadn't offered anything more than sex. Taylor decided, *yeah sure we can have sex*

Great, my parents are out of town this weekend, so do you want to come over tomorrow night around 8?

sure

Cool, see you then

When Taylor woke up late Saturday morning, she had to check her phone to make sure she didn't dream those texts. They were still there. She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, thinking about the situation she had gotten herself into. She was more curious than anything else, but only time would answer her questions on why Beth had really reached out.

After family dinner, Taylor changed into jeans and a button-down: dapper, but still casual. She looked herself over in the mirror, grabbed her car keys and her backpack, yelled to her mom that she was hanging out with a friend, and headed outside. It would only take ten minutes to get to Beth's house, but she didn't want to be late in case Beth hated that as much as Samantha had.

Taylor wiped her hands on her jeans and fiddled with the rolls of her shirt sleeves on the porch, wondering if she should ring the doorbell again. It'd been a few minutes, but maybe it was a bigger house than it looked from the front.

Beth opened the door with, "Sorry, I was turning in Mr. McGuire's essay. Come on in!"

Taylor followed her inside and said, "I like your dress."

Beth smiled a bit, "Thank you, I thought it would be rude to not dress up at least a little bit after I invited you over like that."

Looking at the nice dress and considering Beth's comment that Taylor was a first and last resort, it occurred to Taylor that this was probably Beth's first time having sex with someone. She felt honored that Beth trusted her enough for that, though also confused as to why she wasn't waiting for someone more special.

"Do you want a tour of the house or to just go straight to my room?"

"Well, I'm not sure I want to go *straight* to your room because that would kind of defeat the purpose of me being a woman," Taylor grinned and tried to wink, noticing her palms were a little sweaty again.

Beth rolled her eyes, "Gay jokes already, huh?"

"Can you blame a girl? You put it right in front of me!" she laughed. Beth reminded her a lot of Samantha; she had never really played along with Taylor's jokes.

"Yeah, I suppose that one's on me. But I still don't have an answer to my question," Beth pointed out.

Taylor shrugged, "Just your room would be fine."

Beth led the way up the stairs and down the hall to her room, "I've got pretty much everything we need: lube, vibe, dental dams, dildo, condoms, all that. Did you bring anything?"

“Wow, okay. Um, I only brought my vibe because I wasn’t sure if you had one.”

Taylor thought Beth looked unsure of herself for the first time since Taylor arrived, which made Taylor regret her surprised comment, but the other girl still asked, “Great. Should we uhh . . . start with kissing?”

Taylor nodded, “Kissing sounds good.”

The kissing was a little uncoordinated and forced at first, especially since there wasn’t any history of flirting or sexual tension to cite as proof of attraction. Taylor had to shift a little backward a couple of times when Beth was forceful and their noses got smushed together. After a few minutes, she guided Beth’s hands to her waist. The hands felt like planks at her sides for a few minutes until Beth moved them. Taylor encouraged her with sighs and moans which even she couldn’t tell were genuine or not. Beth clearly did not have a lot of experience (if any at all), stumbling a couple of times or not placing her hands quite right, but Taylor just smiled to herself and moved so the touches felt good, not wanting to ruin what might be Beth’s first time with another person by making her feel self-conscious. Eventually, Beth got the message and the hang of what ways Taylor liked to be touched.

After, while she was pulling her pants up and hunting for her shirt, Taylor thought about how it wasn’t perfect sex and certainly wasn’t very passionate, but it went smoother than Taylor’s own first time when neither she nor Samantha had any idea what to do. They’d each ended up having to finish themselves off, but Taylor made a mental note of what Beth seemed to like best. Regardless of whether this was a one-time thing or she’d be coming back, Taylor was glad she’d agreed to sex with Beth and hoped Beth felt the same.

Back at the front door, with her hands fiddling with pieces of lint in her pockets, she said, “This was cool, thanks for the invite. See you at school?”

“Yeah, see you on Monday,” Beth waved and closed the door. Taylor headed to her car, wondering if Beth would ask her back and if she did if she would say yes.

Sunday was filled with Taylor trying to focus on her homework but instead getting pulled into thoughts about Samantha. That wasn't necessarily new, but her evening with Beth seemed to have dredge up the happy memories from the beginning of their relationship. They'd been dating for four months when Taylor's mom told her they were moving up to Lake Oswego because of a new job in Portland. Suddenly there was a ticking clock on their time together and even though they tried long distance for a couple of months, but Samantha wasn't responsive enough to Taylor's texts and they just couldn't make it work. Taylor couldn't wait to get to college so they could restart their relationship and be a couple like they were supposed to be. She just had to make it to the end of high school first.

Things were back to normal between Beth and Taylor when they got to school on Monday, so the two girls weren't talking. They'd never been friends, but Taylor expected at least some sort of “hi” or other acknowledgment after the weekend hookup. Beth barely even smiled in their morning English class, though, instead focused on hurriedly writing down the notes the teacher was putting on the board. Maybe this meant it really was a one-time thing and Beth had no interest in being friends-with-benefits.

“How was your weekend, Taylor? You were kinda quiet in the group chat,” her friend Sarah asked, distracting Taylor from having to figure out why Beth ignoring her bothered her.

Taylor glanced at Beth again and she saw her look up just a little, either in surprise or warning, but wasn't sure which. “It was good! Not too much going on. I just did homework and played video games with my brother. What about you?”

The rest of the week at school wasn't any different for the girls, despite having three classes together. Beth did send her a text asking if she wanted to hook up again that Friday, however, and that made Taylor excited in that way she didn't want to question too much right now. She didn't have other plans, so she said yes.

Several weekends later, they were still hooking up, so it was definitely going to become a regular thing for the rest of the year. The beginning looked the same every time with the standard pleasantries and heading back to Beth's room. After having sex this time, however, Beth asked, "Anything else you're doing tonight?"

Taylor considered for a moment. There was a party at Jim's, but she wasn't eager to be the designated driver again after she hadn't gotten home until three a.m. last time. "Not really, why?"

"You wanna watch a movie?"

"Sure," Taylor shrugged. "I saw they put *Jumanji* up on Netflix."

Beth pulled it up, turn out the lights on either side of her bed, and then leaned against Taylor, almost like she would on a movie theater date during a horror flick. Beth was apparently one of those people who liked to joke during the movie and tell the characters when they were being stupid, which made Taylor laugh with surprise. Leaning against each other and talking in the dark created more vulnerability and intimacy between the two than it felt like the sex ever had, and Taylor was suddenly very aware of every point of contact and everything that she said and did that made Beth laugh. She liked Beth's laugh, done from her belly with closed eyes, and was paying more attention to opportunities to make her do it again than to the plot of the movie.

Taylor's heartbeat fast from keeping up with Beth's wit as they kept talking and joking about the movie once it was over. It was past midnight before Taylor knew it and she needed to be going home.

"Thanks for coming over, I had a great time," Beth smiled at the door.

"Thanks for having me. I did, too," Taylor replied, her heart still beating fast.

They said goodbye and gave each other one last smile before Beth closed the door and Taylor released the breath she didn't realize she was holding.

She thought about that held breath for half a second before what was going on hit her. Fuck, she was getting a crush, wasn't she? She wasn't supposed to get a crush. She was waiting for Samantha, and this thing with Beth was only supposed to be sex.

Yeah, okay, Beth was cute and smart and funny, so the crush was understandable, but still seemed cruel in light of her agreement with Samantha and her inability to do anything with Beth but hookup and maybe date in secret. Which they couldn't do, right? Having a crush didn't mean she had to ask Beth out, even if they were already hooking up. Besides, dating wasn't what Beth wanted, and secretive dating wasn't what Taylor wanted because she wasn't interested in going back in the closet, even if it was just the relationship part, so they would just have to stay as they were. She could do that, couldn't she?

Taylor checked her phone when she got home to find a waiting text from Beth.

The weather's supposed to be nice next Saturday, do you wanna go for a hike in Tryon?

Taylor smiled.

The air was crisp and the leaves were changing as fall prepared to turn to winter, but it was still November and the cold weather had held off for one more weekend.

Beth was waiting at the end of the parking lot and waved when she saw Taylor pull in. They said hi after Taylor jogged over and headed for the trails.

The two chatted for a bit about how classes were going before the conversation turned to favorite books, movies, music. Taylor found herself laughing more than usual and hoped Beth didn't notice. Inevitably, as with most conversations during senior year, college came up.

"Where are you applying?"

"Smith, Amherst, Wellesley, Swarthmore, Mount Holyoke, and Bryn Mawr."

"Damn, you really are a lesbian, huh?" Taylor laughed. "Why all so far away?"

"Why do most people who go across the country for college do it? I'd like to have a chance to be myself away from the prying eyes of family and classmates. They're also, however, good schools. Or at least that's the reason I'm telling my dad," Beth grinned and winked. Taylor felt her heart flutter a bit.

"What would be so bad about them finding out? No one's caused a huge ruckus over me being out. I think they might even be okay with either of us dating . . . someone," Taylor's heart rate picked up, "or at least not be mad about it."

"Maybe not to your face," Beth pointed out, not unkindly, "but you were also the new kid in town, an exciting unknown entity in a place where it's hard to be unknown. Besides, you don't know my parents. They've made it pretty clear they won't be accepting."

Taylor's forehead wrinkled and she said softly, "I'm sorry to hear that. I hope you'll have a chance to find the acceptance you want in college."

"Me, too," Beth said, eyes on the trail.

It wasn't until winter break that either one of them had a house to themselves and they got the chance to hook up again, and the end of the semester with final papers and exams didn't help. Taylor was glad to finally have those worries off her shoulders, though, and spend time with someone she now considered a friend, despite how strange that friendship might look to anyone else.

Beth was particularly proud of herself that night because it was the first time she'd gotten Taylor to come without any help. When they were done, Beth asked Taylor to stay again. They watched a few comedy specials and were rolling around on the bed laughing by the end.

"Oh God, no matter how many times I watch those, they'll never get old," Taylor managed to get out.

Beth laid down flat and tried to control her breathing but kept bursting back into giggles. When she got her laughter under control, she said, "I hope I get to see one of them live someday."

"I got to see Iliza Shlesinger in San Francisco a few years ago," Taylor confessed, "her *Confirmed Kills* show."

"Oh God, I love that one!" Beth groaned. She paused for a moment and then asked, "What's San Francisco like? Like on a local level. I've only ever been a tourist there."

"San Francisco is great! I mean it's my home, so of course, I love it."

"Its gay scene is legendary; I want to see it someday."

"Yeah, I was really lucky to come out there. I had a lot of queer role models and my parents were super accepting because it was all normal to them."

"Did you have a girlfriend?" Beth playfully nudged Taylor's shoulder and grinned.

Taylor's mood dropped, "I did, actually. We had to break up after I moved here, though. It's hard with the distance and not knowing when you'll see each other again."

"Oh," Beth looked like she regretted her question, "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Maybe I'll see her again someday, maybe at college, and we can see if we still have something," Taylor shrugged, "But I'm here with you now."

Taylor turned back to Netflix and asked a little too loudly what they should watch next rather than address Beth's confused look in reply to her comment.

It became their routine for the rest of senior year – hook up on what weekends they could or hang out somewhere private, act like they didn't know each other that well at school, and then hook up again. At some point, they did start talking more at school, swapping jokes in the classroom and lunch line, but they still had their separate friend groups and didn't push for more.

The feeling of wanting to date Beth never went away, but Taylor swallowed it down every time it popped back up and reminded herself they could only be friends-with-benefits. Beth had made it clear nothing more intimate than what they were already doing was a possibility with her parents. Taylor resolved to only look forward to dating Samantha.

At graduation, after the speeches and the cap toss and most of the important pictures, Beth approached Taylor.

"In case we don't see each other ever again, I wanted to say thank you for agreeing to have sex with me."

Taylor snorted but smiled, "It's not like it was charity work."

Beth shoved her shoulder, "I know, you ass, but I still appreciate it. You could have very easily said no and shared my secret with everyone."

“Nah, I couldn’t have done that. That’d be a violation of community guidelines.”

“Alright, dork,” Beth rolled her eyes. “But seriously, thank you.”

“No problem.” Taylor looked around at their classmates again before she asked, “Why *did* you pick me? And don’t give me that first and last resort thing again, you could have easily waited another year until college and chosen from any number of queer women.”

“Because I knew from group projects you’d pull your weight.”

That caught Taylor off guard and she laughed, “Now who’s making the jokes?”

Beth grinned and shook her head, looking down at the ground before back up at Taylor, “Because you’re thoughtful and funny and you care a lot about the people in your life. I can’t think of better qualities for a first partner to have. If it didn’t work out, I knew you wouldn’t make things awkward. Besides, like I said back then, I wanted to have sex and didn’t want to wait.”

Taylor conceded those were good points. “Well, if this is goodbye, then thank you, too. You were a great friends-with-benefits and an even better friend. I wish you luck at Smith.”

Beth wished her luck in return and they hugged before heading back to their families and friends.

Later that night, while drunk at the graduation party, Taylor sent a text she didn’t regret the next morning. *i wanted to date you*

I wanted to date you, too, pinged back. I’m sorry we couldn’t be more to each other.