

the joys of sex





In real life, sex is mind-blowing, hilarious and erotic in the most unexpected ways. *Behind the Bedroom Door*, a new essay collection edited by SELF's very own articles director, Paula Derrow, gives us an all-access tour of the inner sanctum of everyday (and every-way) sex. Whether you're a spicy seductress or a plain-vanilla kind of gal, this peek between the covers of the season's hottest book will leave you laughing, sighing and begging for more!

Photographs by John Dolan

Laugh-out-loud sex is the best kind. Don't forget to bring your sense of humor to bed... or wherever you are!

Ouch, You're Lying on My Hair

By Valerie Frankel

Woody Allen once said sex and humor don't mix. Apologies to Mr. Allen, but sex and comedy most definitely do go together. It's damn near impossible to wrench them apart. For starters, just look at the penis. The shiny bald head, the squat shape, the way it jerks around like a puppet on a string. How did the first sentient chimp-woman hybrid keep from snickering at the sight of it? When my 8-year-old daughter saw a penis for the first time (Graham Chapman's in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*), she turned to my husband and me and asked, "Is that what it really looks like?" We told her it was. And then she burst into a great guffaw of little girl laughter.

Think of the funniest sound in the world. A fart? A burp? Slurp? Squish? Plop? If you don't make at least three of those noises during sex, you're not doing it right. How about the silliest positions you could get yourself into? Ankles around your ears? One leg sticking straight up like a cat? On your palms and rear in the air like a camel? Now you see my point: Sex is universally the stuff of comedy.

Like everyone else, I started out with fairy tale notions of what sex should be: two people with clean, trim, hairless bodies (in soft focus, of course) moving with the fluidity and flexibility of Olympic gymnasts. I clung to this vision for years, inevitably feeling a crushing disappointment when sex turned out to be badly lit, sweaty, stubbly and fumbling, complete with feet caught in the sheets, wet spots, flying boobs, goose bumps, stomach flab and the humble homeliness that is pubic hair. Take the afternoon I lost my virginity. My deflowerer took me to his uncle's house in a neighboring town; his uncle was away and we'd have privacy, he assured me. We went out back to the pool—our plan was to do it on the lawn so as not to leave evidence on the patio. We'd only just begun when the uncle, plus his wife and their two kids, arrived home unexpectedly to find us in flagrante delicto (like you didn't see that coming). The uncle hurled accusations at us as I scurried around, clumps of grass in my hair, hunting for my shorts in a juniper bush. "I'm not a slut," I said in my own defense. "I'm an honor student!"

Things didn't get much better once I was out of school and living in the adult world. As long as I clung to my romantic vision of sex, I wasn't doing much laughing. Where was the soft focus? I wondered. Where were the simultaneous orgasms? Where were my solo orgasms, for that matter?

Once, in my early 20s, I went to see a friend's band at a New York City club that no longer exists. I met a guy there who bought me many drinks, which I greedily accepted. The band was two hours late. By the time it hit the stage, I was hammered, dancing frenetically and starting to feel green around the gills. I told the guy I needed air, which he thought was code for "a screw in the back stairwell." We started making out there, until I warned him that I felt a teeny, tiny bit sick. He told me to relax and unbuttoned my jeans. When his hands pressed against my exposed belly, I returned every drink he had bought me in a colorful, explosive arc onto his shirt, pants and combat boots. I still remember the stuff trickling gently down the stairwell wall like drops of rain. That was the end of that.

Even my first honeymoon lacked all conventional sense of romance. My then-husband, Glenn, and I were on an Alaskan cruise, and we'd brought along some massage oil as a special treat. It was apple scented and thick. I rubbed a ton of it on him and began what I intended to be the erotic massage to end all erotic massages. About three minutes in, he asked, "Is it supposed to tingle?" I said, "I don't know," and continued. A minute later, he asked, "Is it supposed to burn?" and I noticed that his skin felt hot under my hands. He jumped in the tiny cabin shower, barely tall enough for him, and washed off what he could. He started to break out in hives everywhere, and we had to rush to the infirmary and wake up the ship's doctor to get Benadryl. Glenn recovered in a day, but he was scented-oil phobic forever after. Turned out, for him, it *had* been the erotic massage to end all erotic massages. As for me, it is entirely possible that I was born to be sexually accident-prone.

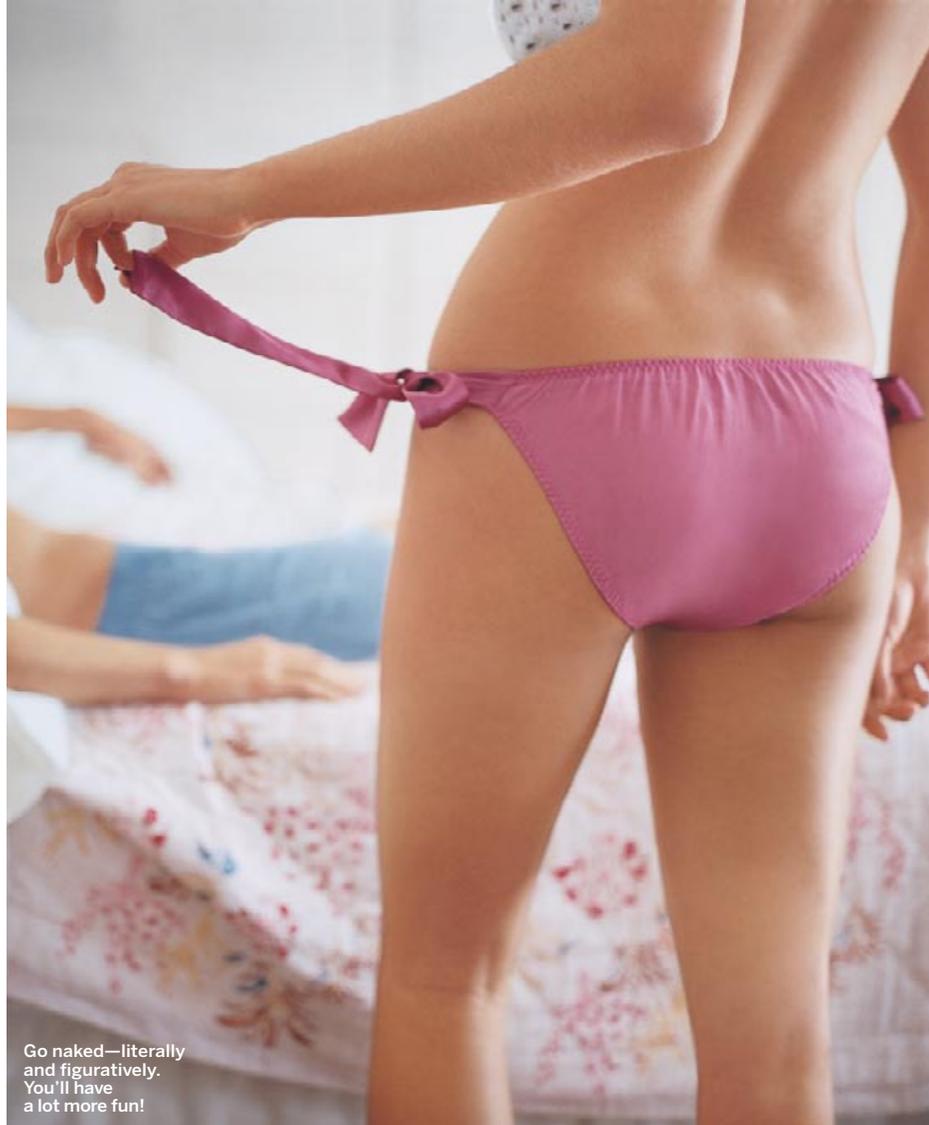
Eventually, thanks to a rutting dog-man of a lover, I realized that the fantasy of picture-perfect sex did not mesh with the grunting honesty of colliding genitals. This guy wasn't satisfied until we were both covered in fluids, our hair tangled, the covers on the floor. He made snuffling sounds and offered an endless stream of coarse commentary. I couldn't help but laugh at how unashamed he was of his swinging balls; I even appreciated it. Once I accepted the squalid, seamy, earthy reality of sex, it suddenly got a lot more fun—and funny.

The revelation was like being hit over the head with a rubber chicken. Satisfying sex should never look like a Hollywood movie, unless it's one starring Will Ferrell.

Most men I know figured this out long before I did. Take farting in bed, which, I concede, is embarrassing. You have a choice there: Either cry about it or laugh. Guys will laugh every bit as hard at the hundredth fart as they will at the first. They have no hang-ups about being the ridiculous human animals that we are. Perhaps their acceptance of bodies as gassy, lumpy, leaky amusement parks is why men have orgasms as easily as they say, "Pull my finger." Men know they're imperfect. They embrace their imperfections. Any guy would be pig-in-mud happy to do the goofiest, stupidest thing in bed, as long as it felt good.

I've come to feel the same way, which is why my now husband, Steve, and I are a sexual match made in Catskills heaven. We tend to conduct ourselves with a certain abandon that makes us forget where the edge of the bed is or that a shower curtain isn't weight bearing. I've pulled leg muscles, sprained my neck, nearly dislocated my jaw. My husband has bloodied his eyebrow, twisted his knee and bent his glasses. We've broken lamps, a lawn chair, the towel holder in the bathroom. I've had splinters in my elbows. He's endured bruises and bug bites. We've both had rashes, chafed skin, cramps and carpet burns.

Neither of us intends to harm the other, or ourselves. We're not into bondage or S&M. The most outré we get is light spanking, and even that we do with affection and witty mockery. Apologies to sadists and masochists everywhere, but I don't see



Go naked—literally
and figuratively.
You'll have
a lot more fun!

how pain wormed its way into pleasure. I suppose if you really are a very bad boy and need to be punished, fine, then bend over and take the paddling you deserve. But my husband is a well-mannered grown man. He deserves kisses and clenches. If, during a position change, my elbow happens to fly directly into his nose, the *Pow!* is an accident of passion. And I feel much worse about it than he does. You might not be able to tell from the tittering, but really I do.

Just this week, we started kissing in the hallway—hot, steamy, with blazing intensity. In an energetic fit of passion, Steve picked me up, threw me down on the bed and lay on top of me, pinning me beneath him. If I were writing a sex scene, I'd describe how I then exposed my vulnerable throat for his delectation, swooning and writhing beneath him, already eager, urgent for the dizzying, shattering release of long-built-up tension. What actually happened was when Steve lifted me in his arms, his back gave out. Throwing me down on the bed? It was more of a drop. His release of long-built-up tension? It arrived a day later, under the ministrations of a chiropractor.

Even worse, at a friend's party one night, where we both drank too much to compensate for the fact that we didn't know anyone, I friskily pushed my game husband into the powder room and knelt in front of him. The crunch of my kneecap on the tile floor should have been a warning. But I was feeling no pain (yet). I reached for his belt and started to unzip. I tried a super sexy move of pressing my cheek to his bulge, only to ensnare my hair in the zipper of his jeans. The disentanglement

took forever—longer than the blow job would have, had we ever gotten to it. I eventually had to yank out a clump of my snarled curls to free myself. By the time we left the bathroom, a line had formed. Each smirking person assumed we'd begrudged his inalienable right to bladder relief for our own selfish pleasure. The next day, I hobbled to the hair salon for bangs that took months to grow out.

One of my fondest romantic memories is of an evening we spent in the Bahamas a few winters ago, when my intrepid husband and I took off from our hotel after dinner in search of a deserted strip of beach. The moonlight bathed us softly. The waves lapped. We started going at it. Before long, a rock was digging into my back, and my husband's knees were shredded on the sand. Beach fleas savagely attacked. Still, we completed the act on principle. Then we tried to clean off in the ocean, wading into the water in the darkness, stepping on broken shells that cut our feet. Sexually speaking, it was OK. The recollection, however, of the two of us limping back into the resort lobby, feet oozing, limbs covered in sand, clothes wet and torn, flea-bite welts surfacing, busboys and guests staring as if we'd just been resurrected from a shipwreck, always makes me laugh. It's a shared treasure from our past, a sexy, funny home movie of the mind that, whenever we replay it, bonds us more deeply than if we'd had some majestic, music-swelling *From Here to Eternity* moment. Because when it comes right down to it, nothing is quite as life affirming as reaching a rousing climax while accidentally head butting the man you love. When our bodies find each other, I don't care that I'm not trim, hairless or gymnast flexible. I don't care if I'm seen from my best angle—and, God knows, neither does Steve. The ultimate secret of our unique chemistry: Much as we love sex, we love to laugh even more. We are real (clumsy) people, having real (sloppy) sex and very real romance together.

Quite possibly, we'll die in some bizarre sexual mishap. Given the options, it's not such a bad way to go.

My Not-So-Kinky Sex Life

By MP Dunleavy

Let me tell you about the time I met a guy, fell in love and decided to pretend that I was kinkier than I was.

I am not the kinky type. I have been fighting my earnest, Ivory Girl, Laura Ingalls, braids-on-the-prairie aura my whole life. Plus, I was born and raised Irish Catholic. I'm not sure if that means there is a chromosomal predisposition to be somewhat sexually guilt ridden or if 2,000 years of church doctrine (Sexual pleasure, bad! Virgin birth, good!) can't help but seep into your psyche.

Despite these hurdles, the ace up my little calico sleeve was always this: I love sex. It has always come naturally to me, pun intended. I've often wondered if Irish people are really horny but are forced to repress it—or if the repression makes

“ I didn't want to spank or be spanked, clamp or be clamped. Or pee on anybody. ”

us all secretly more horny. In any case, although it has been a struggle for me to achieve a modicum of cool in other areas—even a thin veneer for social emergencies—I've always been confident in my abilities in bed. I may not be much of a risk taker (in college, it was always pot yes, coke no), but I've never shied away from sexual adventure. I did it on top of a mountain once. Very rocky. I don't recommend it.

So the one thing I was counting on as I got older was that my innate friskiness and sexual confidence would continue to shine even as the sun went down on my 30s. But when I found myself single again at age 36, after a devastating breakup followed by a cross-country move (always a rotten combination), I suddenly felt as if I'd fallen out of step, sexually speaking. One night, a friend happened to mention that he'd been spanked by two women at a party (at an art museum, no less); another described her decision to leave a different gathering, “you know, before the orgy started.” And the one I'll never forget: I was hanging out with a few friends at an Indian restaurant, sharing plates of curry, when one woman announced that her new beau had just introduced her to nipple clamps. “It was kind of fun,” she said with a giggle. I tried not to gag on my lamb korma, as I imagined cold steel on my most tender parts. I wanted to ask her if they hurt—but of course, that would be the point of clamping one's nipples, wouldn't it?—so I decided to keep my questions (was I the only one who had any?) to myself.

Clearly, I was missing something. I didn't want to spank or be spanked, clamp or be clamped. Or pee on anybody, if that's what was next. I was really looking forward to getting laid again (soon, I hoped), but these conversations left me uneasy. I read them like tea leaves, as portents of unsettling changes afoot. I'd never thought of sex in terms of trends, but I detected a hipper-than-thou air floating about these discussions, the same sort of tone people fall into when describing their kitchen remodeling projects: “Well, we decided to go with slate for the floor and Sicilian marble for the counters; the contractor said we'd love that lived-in bistro look.”

I have nothing against kink (or Sicilian marble, for that matter). But the idea that sex wasn't simply for fun anymore, that there was now some cachet attached to whether you frequented nightclubs with names like The Vault or used a butt plug—now that was irritating. Suddenly there I was again, the good girl, the not-quite-cool girl, squeamish about *(continued on page 120)*

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(continued from page 97) the idea of donning a harness or handcuffs. I know I sound neurotic, but when I got home after that Indian dinner, I felt compelled to tally up my slightly off-the-beaten-path sexual experiences. The list, as it turns out, was depressingly short:

- 1) **Drugs and sex**—limited
- 2) **Blindfolds**—once or twice
- 3) **Whips**—never
- 4) **Chains, ropes, handcuffs**—nope
- 5) **Porn**—a little, but you know, the production values are terrible.
- 6) **Hot wax**—only accidentally, while moving a lit candle from the dinner table to the bedroom—which did not inspire me to try it on purpose, ever.

My sexual prowess had always been the one thing, my secret thing, that I believed kept me from being a dork. Now that small corner of my confidence felt threatened. (Hey, it was a vulnerable time in my life, and there's nothing like self-doubt to screw up your inner compass.) For many reasons, I now felt I had something to prove sexually—as if I were a 15-year-old trying her first cigarette. Who cares if you like it; you want to be able to say you tried it. There *had* been a little kink in my last relationship, in the form of anal sex. It wasn't my favorite, but I had agreed to it and added it to my repertoire the way a Girl Scout picks up another badge. I felt it gave me some cred—until my friend's nipple-clamp confession, that is.

In the midst of this crisis of sexual confidence, I happened to hook up with a guy who seemed like a safe bet for a nice, simple boink—exactly what I needed to get my groove back or exhale or whatever. Instead, he just added fat to the fire, as my mother used to say. Shortly after we started sleeping together, he launched into a merry story about one of his nights at an S&M club and repeated with gusto what it had been like to be whipped in front of a small crowd. He was fishing, clearly. And although I wasn't biting (in fact, I bid him a prompt farewell), it seemed to me that the *Kama Sutra* was on the wall. The whole world was a lot kinkier than I'd thought. It was time to upgrade from Mary Richards to Carrie Bradshaw.

That's where my head was when a friend suggested we organize a dinner party for a few singles we knew, ourselves

included. I'd provide the women; he would bring the guys. I arrived armed and ready for anything. Or so I imagined. I spent most of that evening flirting and making small talk, bumming cigarettes from various people while claiming I didn't smoke, trying to be as swashbuckling and unconventional as possible. I thought I was Ms. Cutting Edge—or at least that my command performance might make others think so. Dating, especially in New York City, is all smoke and mirrors anyway. That night, fueled by many glasses of wine, I freely opined on masturbation and whether sex with a dildo was better or not.

Meanwhile, there was a moment that lives in my mind as proof that as much as you try to escape yourself, you show up anyway. I had invited a cousin to this gathering, also single, and both of us had been raised in very much the same Irish-Catholic climate. When the aforesaid topic of masturbation came up, I remember noticing that she looked uncomfortable, especially when I plunged in saying God knows what. We didn't speak again for several years after that night, and I always wondered if she was appalled by my brashness. On some level, I was, too.

I started dating a guy I met that night. With his wavy, slightly unkempt hair and worn motorcycle jacket, he looked every inch the downtown poser, so I was wary. But he was also sweet and well-mannered, a thorough listener and, as I found out, an amazing lover. Appearances, as they say, can be deceiving. Despite the rocker-poet garb, he was a quiet, bookish guy who was finishing writing a novel. I was smitten but also convinced that the other boot was about to drop. He was too good to be true. Surely Mr. Downtown Poser Guy had other things on his mind besides standard-issue sex. How many S&M clubs had *he* been to? How many orgies? Despite our obvious chemistry—most especially simply being able to talk with one another—I couldn't stop fretting that he would be leagues ahead of me experiencewise, already bored by mere blindfolds and nipple clamps. What if he was a porn-watching golden shower freak?

I can see now that my fixation on kink was mostly a manifestation of all I lacked back then: bravery, confidence, strength and the gutsiness gained from finally shoring up your life so no one else can wreck it. Then again, Freud once wrote

that the fear is the wish. Perhaps beneath my anxiety about kink lurked a desire to cross lines and break taboos. What else could explain this dogged pursuit of something I didn't even want?

One night, I whispered to Mr. Downtown Poser Guy that I was open to, you know, trying different things. "What sorts of things?" he asked.

Well. He had me there. I hoped the darkness would cover the fact that my bluff had just expired, as I struggled to figure out what, exactly, to propose. Handcuffs would sound pathetically junior high. Doing it in a restaurant bathroom might make me sound like a nut. Whips? I wasn't desperate enough to suggest something I'd never actually try. So I mumbled something about "experimenting" and hoped I sounded convincing.

"OK, we can experiment," he said, snuggling me close. I could feel the flush of embarrassment crawl over my skin. Here I was, trying to prove I was hip to something that didn't even appeal to me. How stupid was that? Especially because the sex we were having didn't seem to require any embellishment.

Speaking of which, I realize that this is an essay about sex, and right about now the reader would be entitled to a description of how our lovemaking melted the sheets. Which it did. Despite my offers to tie him up or let him blindfold me (you can tell someone has no knack for kink when most of her ideas come from comic books), we were generally too lusty to do anything more creative than get our hands on each other and go at it. Mostly in bed. Although we tried the sofa once.

Yet even as those early weeks flew by and we both knew we were falling in love, I found myself waiting for him to express his dissatisfaction with our sex life, to admit that for him, two-on-one was the ultimate. Personally, I loathed the idea of a threesome, so of course I became obsessed with the notion that this must be what he craved. Then it would be farewell, Mr. *Ménage à Trois*. But I had to know.

So one morning, before we got out of bed, my facade by now in shreds, I put my arms around him and tried to keep my voice steady—this, after all, could be the end—and asked him if he had ever had a threesome. He didn't hesitate. "Nope," he said, with a telltale gleam in

his eye that told me he knew more than I was giving him credit for. "What about you?" he asked.

"No," I admitted, so relieved I felt like flying. Almost. I inched out on the last twig of the limb. "Well, I mean, is that something you want?"

"You know, to be honest, it's never really appealed to me," he said. "It just seems pretty messy," then clarified that he didn't mean lube on the sheets, but emotionally. "I guess I'd be jealous. I don't particularly like to share my person with some other person."

But still, I needed to be absolutely sure: Did he want us to be more adventurous? More daring?

He said he wouldn't close off the possibility, but our sex life certainly didn't depend on it, no.

Did he think he might want to add a couple of exotic role-playing games or mild bondage to our repertoire?

Not really.

Wouldn't he like it if I wore high-heeled boots and no underwear?

Well, yes, he conceded, that would definitely be hot.

But, my future husband stressed, as we lay in our favorite position, limbs entwined, eyes locked, he would rather we took our time getting to know each other and let the experimenting emerge naturally from there.

Six years later, with both our facades now retired (that motorcycle jacket lives in a box under the guest bed), I have to admit that my husband and I are still pretty tepid explorers. After we saw the movie *Secretary*, we tried on some power games for size. That was titillating, and led us to flirt with some role playing (you won't be surprised to hear that one involved a priest and an ingenue, but that was a while ago). Every once in a while, we go nuts and try some variation on a theme, like talking dirty. Or I'll get a bikini wax and things will really heat up. To be honest, now that we've got a toddler running around, we're thrilled that we still have a sex life, unlike some couples we hear about. Straight-up though our sex life may be, I'm grateful that we continue to explore what we've always loved best: each other. ■

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