

I'm Having Sex and I Will Die: On (Nearly) Overcoming Purity Trauma

by Zoe Lambert

I'm sixteen and touching myself. Not even skin to skin. Through pyjamas and cotton knickers. "Masturbation," Mum says. "All your problems come from that." She must be right because our book *Questions Young People Ask, Answers That Work* argues that surely, masturbation is an unclean habit, even though it's not mentioned in the Bible. *Think consequences*, I tell myself. *Think how you're hurting Jehovah*. Masturbation is mentally and emotionally defiling. It leads to fornication, the book tells me. "Eww!" I write in my diary. "How gross!" But still, I can make myself come through thick fabric. Even though Mum has been in bed for days in the room next to mine. I lie on my back under my duvet, legs squeezed together, and use just one finger. Wipe my hand on the sheet because it's dirty. Listen, in case anyone can hear my silence.

I'm twenty, I'm having sex, and I will die. All my life, I've attended three meetings a week. I learned that we are separate from the world, that I should not yolk with unbelievers. But only three weeks into my student exchange in Paris and I'm in bed with a Worldly man who tastes delicious—of mint and Lipton tea. I made a vow to Jehovah to remain clean, to not engage in fornication, but this hot student I met in French class played melancholic Italian songs on his guitar.

If I give into this temptation, it will feel like dying when I'm forced to confess my sin. Three Elders, indistinguishable from each other with their paunches and receding hair and dull suits, will judge my broken vow to Jehovah of no sex before marriage. I will be dead to my family when I'm disfellowshipped, when they cut me out of their life and home. It will be a living death to lose everyone I know. Shit.

Outside, a police siren blares through Oberkampf. My thighs clench together as he hitches up my denim skirt. Maybe, if I stop now it won't count? But he has such long eyelashes and his shirt is off. Jeans flung to the floor. He's really quite hairy. Reasonably muscular. He turns over to open his bedside drawer. I will die with all the

Worldly People at Armageddon. I will be struck down by Jehovah while Mum and Dad will be safe in a Kingdom Hall in Manchester, ready for the paradise where Mum won't need her wheelchair.

He seems to be having trouble with the condom. I lift myself to see, but he turns over and we kiss, his stubble scratching my chin, his thing already pressing against me. I hear my mum's voice: "You're following your selfish desires." I know, Mum. But I hate being the uncool religious girl. How can you be so spiritually weak? I'm weak and hate myself for it. He is touching me down there. I make some kind of noise, but it doesn't feel as good as I expected. What am I? Rubber? Plastic? Part of me isn't even on the bed. She's a mannequin in the window. Eyes wide. Her body rigid. At Armageddon the ground will crack open and swallow me up, like the drawings in *The Watchtower*. He presses against me. Harder. Harder. A terrible stinging pain. He sighs and asks if I'm a virgin and I shrug and laugh. We flop on our backs, joking that life is never like films, but my heart is pounding at my crimes. Later, after we eat slices of baguette with Nutella, he tries again. Part of me watches from the window while he can't get it in.

Over the next few weeks, we go back to his apartment and have sex again and again and again. Each time there's blood on my thighs, on the sheet. Each time it hurts like a ramming stick. But he's so gorgeous with his dark curly hair and scientific ideas. Am I a bad person for wanting a different life from my one of Manchester meetings and ministry? I want to live. Not only in the Paradise, but now. And living means saying yes. Living means moving with him and making noises like in films and gritting my teeth. Living means doing what he wants. He asks me what I want. I shrug, laugh. He cracks on with what he hopes I want. Fornicators will not inherit God's kingdom, will they? He rubs me too hard, but I don't want to make him feel bad, so I gasp like it's great. He enters me again and I smile and breath through the pain, through my selfish desires.

Later, we lie there. It's late and he's asleep. He says he's falling for me, that he likes my open mind and spirit. I think we're falling in love. But there's a gnawing under my ribs. My eyes sting. I've started having sex and stopped sleeping. No one else among my friends is as moral as Witnesses, so no one gets what I'm going through. I try to explain to him, this student, but he says my religion is an anachronism and out of date. I look away and don't say what I think: surely, sex is less sinful if you don't enjoy it.

I'm **twenty-one** and gulping red wine to get me in the mood. I've moved to Florence to be with the love of my life, the student I met in Paris, like I'm the star of my own romantic comedy, so come on, I mean, I'm happy, right? So why does my stomach feel hollow yet full of stones? *You brought this on yourself*. Check my phone. No call from Mum. She's only just home from hospital after more steroids, though she will be fishing to find out what I'm up to. She found out last time, said, "You will tell the Elders or I will." Finish the glass. Pour more while he's in the bathroom. Nothing calms like wine. The Duomo is at the end of via dei Servi, but my room smells of damp and pigeons. Mould sprouts on the wall.

Being in that room where three Elders, three middle-aged men asked over and over, "How many times, Sister, did you have sex?", has stripped me of my body. I can't eat. I take laxatives when I do. My hair is falling out. *The Watchtower* magazine reasons that the Judicial Committee is needed "to keep the congregation clean," but I said nothing to those men, nothing more than they already knew. I sat there, the plastic chair digging into my thighs. Knees pinned together. Face hot with shame. My stillness mistaken for repentance. At least I was not disfellowshipped. At least my family can still speak to me.

My boyfriend comes back. The blow-up bed squeaks against the floor as he sits down to unlace his shoes. I sip my wine while he gets undressed, my back against the cold wall. He takes my glass, places it on the floor, and kisses me. At least it doesn't hurt anymore. At least I'm working out what I like. I open my mouth to say, "Can you..." as he tugs my pyjama bottoms down, but the Elders' lined faces ask again: *How many times, Sister, how many times?* My desires are unclean. I am unclean. I wash myself every day with Femfresh, but still, I feel dirty. I want him to go down on me, but what if I smell? My boyfriend asks if I'm okay and I say, of course, and to prove this, pull up my top. The damp air pricks my arms. Making love is what you give to the other person, and that's what matters, right? Not your own selfish pleasure. Not my selfish desire. *You'd be happy if you obeyed Jehovah*. I grab my phone again. Still no call. It will be tomorrow now.

"Switch it off," he says. "Don't let your mother run your life."

"I told you," I say. "I'll never be in that room again."

He sighs and says I'm an adult and it's ridiculous that I pretend to never see my boyfriend, lying like a teenager.

I look away. A shutting down feeling, my throat closing up. But some knowledge deep inside: I will not let my chronically ill mother have to choose between me and the religion. He strokes my hair from my face and says he's sorry he's upset me again. We kiss and he pulls down my knickers. Later, in my diary, I write, "I don't think I want "it" anymore. But I don't say anything. I can't move."

I'm a twenty-two-year-old MA student and snogging an undergraduate in the student union. He's cute and two years younger than me. An ageing DJ plays eighties music. I ended things with my first boyfriend on the phone. Refused to see him. Said, "I need to be on my own." Not the truth. Left him broken with not knowing, unable to admit I'd slept with him many times when I didn't want to and now, I can't bear to see him. I sway, drunkenly, to Kylie Minogue. At the bottom of my vodka and lemonade, I see everything clearly. I need to start again. Not have sex for a long time, not until I know I'm ready. Not for a religion or family. But for me. Over the music, I shout, "I'm not sleeping with you!"

"What, what did you say?"

"I'm not sleeping with you!"

"Oh, right, of course."

My chest feels more expansive. We dance over to my housemates. Later, we kiss again, like it's the school disco.

I'm twenty-three and at a new guy's flat. He's beautiful and has an attractive swagger. He wants to become a director. He knows he will. I can pick up anyone I want, and I like the feeling this gives me. The tingling thrill on my skin. We're kissing and he's stroking my thigh. His hand edges to my thong. I push it away playfully. I say, "I told you I'm not sleeping with you." We laugh and drink for hours. He walks me home in the early hours of the morning. He says, "That was fun, but I'm not seeing you again. I want you to know that." I blink, confused. I hadn't thought that far ahead. I close my porch door behind me and sink onto the step. The morning light is grey through the frosted glass. Some feeling of being put in my place. Like I had to be reminded of something. For some reason, I start to cry. He's just a dickhead. But I can't stop. Gulping tears. I experience some kind of grief, but I don't know what for. For something that keeps getting lost. For my pitiful attempts. I cry for my first partner and his emails saying he's heartbroken and doesn't understand what's happened. I don't answer

them. I cry for the fact I can't even research my faith without panicking that I'm an Apostate, without my brain shutting down. I go into the kitchen, eat what I can find in the fridge and vomit it up again.

I'm twenty-four and on top of the guy I've been dating a few months. We're in my room in Manchester, my housemate singing along to Blondie in the shower. An orgasm is building in me. What a relief to find I can. Two ways now. I reach down and touch his face. He sucks my thumb. I come and then he does. We lie on the pillows. His eyes close. I place my hands over my face. All I want is to put what happened behind me. It wasn't that bad, was it? At least that terrible guilt over sex has faded. My mother's multiple sclerosis gets steadily worse. She needs me. Now I feel bad when I don't visit, don't help out. Nothing I do feels enough.

I reach over and take my morning citalopram. He asks why I even need those. My back goes straight and I swallow more water. My phone rings. He's muttering behind me, "Why do you always answer. We're in bed, for Christ's sake."

"Something might have happened," I hiss. "She's ill. I'm a carer!" I answer, "Hi Mum!" while pulling on my dressing gown. "Aha, sure, yeah, I'll be over later. Do you want to go to the Trafford Centre?"

"Who is that?" Mum asks.

"My housemate. I'm in the living room. One sec." I go into the hall while she asks if I went to the meeting on Sunday and I say I had a cold and stayed home. I will definitely tell her soon that I don't go to meetings anymore. Definitely.

When I come back in, he's getting dressed. He announces I have a problematic relationship with my family, that I always answer the phone to my mother, no matter where we are—the other day in a restaurant. "It's just rude."

"But she's ill," I say. "Something might be wrong."

"Why did you lie to her?"

I turn away and fold my arms.

Behind me, he says, "This isn't going anywhere, is it?"

"No," I say. "It's not." A headache stings behind my eyes. He might be a lecturer in classics and ancient philosophy, but he knows little about what people must do to survive.

Later, I help my mother put her shoes on, fit her feet on the pedals of her wheelchair, and something in me is soothed.

I'm twenty-seven and having unprotected sex with a man who's always angry. It's early morning in a London hotel. "You were funny," he says, like he's proud of me. "The whole hotel could hear you shouting while we were arguing." He smiles and kisses my breast. I'm wet, and he slips inside me, and we come at the same time with no effort. Shocking, really, the disapproving voice in my head says, because this is awful. But the cycle of our arguments really is my fault. He left his partner for me, and I won't even tell my family he exists. And yes, I left my family's religion, but that was a while ago. I'm using religion as an excuse. I argue with him in angry texts. He won't answer my calls to explain. Nothing I say seems to help. There's always something I haven't thought of that hurts him. Now, however, he snuggles up to me, kissing my jaw. His sperm drips between my legs. "I'll have to get the morning after pill," I say.

He pulls away and the air shifts. My chest clenches. Silence. The brief happy interlude is over and I already yearn for it.

When we get back to Manchester, he sends me more angry texts, saying all he wants is for us to have a baby, He'd been hoping I'd get pregnant this morning. He needs children. He needs solidity. "I can't believe you're having a mini-abortion," he says on the phone. I put the phone in my bag and take the pill anyway.

I visit my mother and break down crying. "It's a man, isn't it?" I shake my head, giving them nothing. I told them I don't go to Meetings now, but the threat of that room and those men is always something that might still happen. "Here," she says, her voice kinder, more maternal than it's been in years. "Have one of my Valium."

Soon the boyfriend who shouts leaves me for someone else. While he is still with her, we have unprotected sex again.

I'm twenty-nine and having unsatisfactory sex with a barman in his single bed in Whalley Range. We snorted cocaine off the disabled toilet seat in a lock-in while snow flickered on the window. A pang strikes as I think of my mother, of the many disabled toilets we've squeezed into together by gaining entrance with her radar key, of the smell of urine in a catheter. "Your hair's still falling out," she said recently. "Why don't you look after yourself?"

The barman and I went back to his house. I'm hoping for more cocaine, but there isn't any. He sleeps. I don't. My eyes sting, but I'm too lethargic to get up. In the morning, I walk home through thick snow, sickened with myself. This doesn't stop me

from sleeping with a journalist, an actor, another barman, another barman. Get a coil to keep me safe. Have guilty, shameful STD checks because I no longer bother to say "Use a condom." I wake up, not sure where I am. Lost my handbag. Lost my phone. Restarted my PhD three times. Paused my studies for months because the angry guy broke me, though he says I was already broken, and he had no chance. Instead, I go to parties on a Friday and come home on a Monday, where time stretches into ribbons and I feel deep connections to people I've just met. Fuck that guy. Fuck everything. Dab or snort or swallow. My veins ache with what I can't speak of. Only briefly will the clench around my chest loosen. A handsome Scottish Tory tells me off for sleeping with him too soon. Fuck him, whatever. Still, I feel sick, ashamed. See another barman covered in tattoos who is gentle and only listens to the Beach Boys, then a musician, an ex-musician, a publicist. Sometimes for a night, a few weeks, sometimes on/off for months. Best to end things before they do. Scrape back some power. A threesome with a friend and her ex in a hotel while I'm on my period. This is it; I've broken all my taboos. Am I free now? But I'm too embarrassed, some deeper liquid shame. "I want to watch," I say. So, I do. She's beautiful. I wonder what it would be like to be more into women.

I'm thirty-three. It's a damp Monday morning, and I've done it again. Sleeping with someone and then regretting it. Met on OkCupid. Our second date on Friday, watching a band, The Sheep Dogs, at Night and Day in Manchester. He was happy to go home, but some mischief took over, my old need to live in the moment. "Come back to Chorlton," I said. There are late-night bars. "Come back to mine," I said. There's wine in the fridge. Now it's raining and my flat is silent. For the next couple of weeks, he's busy, he says, fighting fascists. His organising job has long hours. Does it, though? Really? Are there that many fascists in Manchester? Checking my phone over and over when I should be marking student work. Can't bear it anymore. Text him saying it's over. Phew. Breathe. I tell a friend I've bravely ended things again and she says, "Why? I thought you said you liked him?" I have no answer. Am I the problem? I am finally earning enough to pay for therapy. When I tell the counsellor I was brought up a Jehovah's Witness, he says, jokingly, "You're going to need a lot of therapy!"

"I'll need a female therapist," I say.

My OkCupid date and I bump into each other at a political event a month or so later. I have a new strategy. How about honest communication. How about taking things a bit more slowly. We do, and it works. Only half a lifetime to get here.

I'm forty and my OkCupid date-now-partner asks, "What do you fantasise about?" Together for years now. "Oh, you know," I mumble. "Stuff." I close my eyes. I'm not being honest again. "What about you?" I ask. He tells me. "Great, let's do that then."

Later, I drink some wine and write in my journal. I have never fantasised about sex. How can I when I've been told my desires are bad? I share this with him because I've learned that shame thrives in the dark. We spend hours researching ethical feminist porn to give me some ideas. Turns out I really like porn, even shit porn. I stop being so vanilla. I decide I like how I smell. We breathe, 'you're dirty,' to each other, but that doesn't mean 'unclean'. I read novels where characters confidently have sex. I admire this younger generation of writers, their lack of prudishness. How do they do it?

It's lockdown, and Mum is dying. Every week, I drive to her house and take over the night shift so Dad can sleep. All night, I turn her in her bed so she doesn't get sores. In the morning, I shower her. I wash her vagina and this, this act, this one thing is beautiful.

My mother dies believing she's going to paradise without me. I calm myself with the Valium she left behind. Grief rips me open, but I start writing about the first time I had sex. Trying to capture what that was like. Words roll in my mouth. I want to spit them out. My stomach hurts with what might happen if those words are read. I end scenes coyly. Use flowery metaphors. Write my experience of sex like it's a romantic comedy. Delete, delete, delete! Try again. I start to have sexual dreams, like I'm a teenager, of boyfriends from the past, of now. In the spaces between memory and dream, something shifts in me. I wake, horny and jump on OkCupid partner. "This," he says, "is unusual."

I'm forty-something and wanking furiously. I pause to search in my bedside drawer. I've had a lot of sex, and I won't die. But my mother is dead, and I'm alive with rage. There are words for what I went through. There are terms and diagnoses. There are theories and studies. Words like purity trauma, religious abuse, high-control groups, narcissistic abuse. There are words like freeze and fawn. Fight and flight. It wasn't just

me. In the nineties, unmarried pregnant women in Ireland were still being abused in laundries. In the US, little girls were pledging their purity to their fathers. Across the world, people are killed for being gay. Your sexuality is only a part of who you are, but if it's stamped on, it crushes all of you. Like Orwell's boot stamping on a face forever. There it is. My vibrator. I can write the words "my vibrator" without a shiver of shame. No, that's not true. A bit of shame, but not enough to stop me writing it. Not nearly enough.



Zoe Lambert is a writer based in Lancaster, UK. Her current work explores the religious and purity trauma of growing up as a Jehovah's Witness. She has published numerous short stories and is a lecturer in creative writing at Lancaster University. She is interested in the formal possibilities of fragments and moments in narrating lives and is currently working on a fragmented memoir exploring these questions through the lens of mothers and daughters.