CHAPTER 2

If It Exists, There Is Porn of It

Mason, nineteen, met me in the lobby of his dorm at the Big Ten university where he was a sophomore, dressed in a thrift-store cardigan, gray sweatpants, thick-soled sneakers, and two different-colored argyle socks. I couldn't tell what the length or color of his hair might be—it was completely covered, as were his eyebrows, by a neon-green stocking cap onto which he'd doodled stars and moons with a Sharpie, along with a favorite quote by Jean-Paul Sartre: "Like all dreamers, I mistook disenchantment for truth." When I commented on his outfit, Mason looked down quizzically, almost as if he were surprised to be wearing anything at all. "I guess I'm kinda 'dadcore,'" he said mildly. At five foot ten and 190 pounds, some might say Mason had a bit of a dad bod as well, though he was significantly trimmer than a few years before, when he played defensive lineman for his suburban Milwaukee high school football team. "I used to be pretty fat," he admitted. "The coaches would tell you to eat as much fast food as you can. They're like, 'After practice, have your parents take you to McDonald's.'" Mason was so soft-spoken, so

laid-back that I had a hard time imagining him on the gridiron. The truth was, although he joined his first team at age eight, he'd never loved the game—for one thing, he hated being hit. He only continued because his two older brothers had played, so he thought he was "supposed to"; after eleventh grade, he finally bailed. "I understand it's a boy thing to get all rugged and dirty and bruised up," he said, "and I'm down for rugged and dirty, but I don't like experiencing physical pain."

That summer, in part because he thought his weight was hurting his chances with girls, he lost forty pounds by restricting his daily food intake to a granola bar, a few pretzels, and a couple handfuls of nuts. He also began following YouTube fitness sensations such as Aziz Shavershian, a skinny-kid video gamer–turned-bodybuilder who has only become more popular since his death from heart failure at age twenty-two, amid rumors of anabolic steroid abuse; Vegan Gains, who once posted footage of his eighty-two-year-old grandfather mid–heart attack to illustrate the perils of eating meat; and Frank Yang, who claimed to have put on over thirty pounds of chiseled muscle in just three weeks without the help of pharmaceuticals. Fitness gurus are to boys what beauty and "thinspo" vloggers can be to girls: a source of entertainment, motivation, and, potentially, self-harm. For a while, Mason was obsessed with how-tos on creating six-pack abs (which in actuality are only achieved through dangerous loss of body fat). He also went through a phase of watching freak-show videos about synthol, an oil that, when injected into the biceps or calves, creates the illusion of impossibly enormous muscles. Sometimes he followed recommendations that went beyond the gym: when a favorite vlogger enthused about the mind-expanding benefits of psilocybin, Mason tracked down mushrooms from a dark net site that he described as "like Amazon, but for drugs."

Turning to the internet for purported expert advice, guidance, and information is second nature to millennials, so I was surprised when, midway through our conversation, Mason pulled out a purple flip phone. He'd met a guy at the Lollapalooza music festival the previous summer who had made the switch; the boy claimed chucking the smartphone kept him more present in real life, less dependent on technology. "He made the point that for our age group, whenever there's a moment of silence people take out their phone to avoid awkwardness. And he wanted to embrace that awkwardness because life's an awkward endeavor." The idea intrigued Mason; plus, he'd been reading a lot about how smartphones and social media were linked to anxiety and depression among today's teens. He'd had a brush with those himself, during his first semester of college. His then-girlfriend was three hundred miles away at another school, but they were in near-perpetual contact via text and Snapchat. They also kept track of each other through a location-sharing app. So when his girlfriend didn't return his texts late at night, Mason could see precisely how often she was at the dorm of the guy with whom he suspected she was hooking up. "I was checking compulsively," he said. "It's so enticing. You know it's bad for you. You know it's going to be negative. But you can't stop doing it. So . . ." He waggled his flip phone.

"Also," he added, almost as an aside, "it keeps me from watching porn."

Porn World Versus Real World

It's no secret that today's children are guinea pigs in a massive porn experiment. Whereas (mostly) boys of previous generations

might have passed around a filched, soiled copy of *Playboy* or possibly *Penthouse,* today anyone with a broadband connection can instantly access anything you can imagine—and a whole lot of stuff you don't want to imagine—right on their phones, more or less anonymously and regardless of how many obstacles parents try to put in place. "Porn" is, of course, a broad category, ranging from "lovemaking" purportedly posted by real-life couples, to fetish videos to eroticized violence and racism. It can be exploitative or ethically produced; it can be feminist. As the classic meme "Rule #34" states, "If it exists, there is porn of it. No exceptions." For the purposes of this discussion, though, "porn" refers to the sexually explicit video clips that heterosexual teenagers most readily and easily obtain (I'll talk about gay porn later). Also, I am restricting myself to minors and college students; adults' porn use is a separate issue.

Let's toss in a couple more caveats. Such as: curiosity about sex is normal. Sexual urges are normal. Masturbation is not only normal but healthy and important to sexual development (though sanctioned for and practiced by far more boys than girls). Seeking out erotica and information about sex is normal, too. The big change for today's young people, and the reason for new concern, is the aforementioned rise of high-speed internet. More specifically, it was the advent of Pornhub. Launched in 2007, when the boys I interviewed were on the cusp of puberty, Pornhub, like YouTube, allows users to upload, view, rate, and share videos for free, including professionally produced content. One hundred million visitors per day (the combined populations of Canada, Poland, and Australia) engage in fifty-seven thousand searches per minute of videos that are divided into categories such as oral, anal, blond, ebony, MILF, cuckold, squirting, teen, and *My Little Pony.* The site is owned by Montreal-based

MindGeek, which also controls the other major adult "tubes": YouPorn and Red Porn, as well as the production studios Brazzers, Digital Playground, Reality Kings, Sean Cody, and Men.com (the latter two of which feature gay and bisexual performers). MindGeek's virtual monopoly in the industry, along with abundant free X-rated content (despite "no nudity" policies) on sites such as Tumblr, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat, has made porn simultaneously ubiquitous and, for its performers and producers, largely unprofitable—not unlike the effect of Napster and YouTube on musicians. In the process, it's also given minors historically unprecedented access to sexually explicit media, most of it reflecting traditional gender dynamics and shot from the male's point of view—often a hostile, narcissistic male at that: sex is portrayed as something men do *to* rather than *with* women. Women exist primarily as providers of male orgasm (the goal of every encounter); their own pleasure is presented as a performance to that end. The men themselves appear joyless, mechanical. Given its boundless novelty and availability, contemporary porn raises questions about how young people's erotic imaginations will be shaped long before they've engaged in so much as a good-night kiss: the impact it may have on desire, arousal, behavior, sexual ethics, and their understanding of gender, race, and power in sexual expression.

Absent other sources, it's clear that teenagers turn to porn, at least in part, for sex education, even as they claim to know that its content is about as authentic as pro wrestling. Girls in particular consult sexually explicit media for a template of male partners' expectations, despite being more than twice as likely as boys to be disturbed by its treatment of women. One national survey of teenagers and their parents found that the teens watched significantly more porn, and harder-core porn, than the adults. While

more than 56 percent of the boys and 38 percent of the girls had seen pornography (a figure that skews low because it includes very young teens), only a third of their fathers and fewer than a fifth of their mothers had. The boys were at least three times more likely than their dads to have watched videos depicting facial ejaculation, double penetration, BDSM, coercive sex, gang bangs, and rape; the differential between girls and their mothers was generally even higher.

I never asked a boy in my interviews *whether* he watched porn (nor, unlike with girls I interviewed, did I ask *whether* he had ever masturbated). That would have shot my credibility to hell. Because of course all of them—every single one—had. Instead, my question was when they first saw it. Often, the first exposure was unbidden: older brothers (or older brothers' friends) spun around a smartphone screen or motioned them over to a computer, either as a manly rite of passage—doing the little guy a favor—or to freak them out. Or maybe a friend sent a link to a video of a naked woman masturbating or a clip of a man shoving his outsize penis down a woman's throat. Boys typically considered such pranks to be, yes, "hilarious."

Those involuntary sightings tended to happen younger, at age nine or ten. Intentional searches started, for most, somewhere between sixth and eighth grade—usually before the boys had masturbated or were able to ejaculate. Initially, they'd type something rudimentary into Google like "boobies" or "naked women" (though what is returned by those searches is hardly innocuous); they often described their maiden glimpse of female genitalia as more alarming than arousing. "When I was in sixth grade, boobs were really cool," said a high school senior in San Francisco. "But I couldn't handle vaginas. They just look kinda weird, like an alien mouth." What was originally disturbing soon

became compelling. Over time—and here's where this generation is unique—most of the boys learned masturbation entirely in tandem with porn, yoking it to their cycle of desire, arousal, and release. "I started masturbating in sixth grade, about a year after I was first shown porn," said Mitchell, a sophomore at a Los Angeles college. "I don't think I masturbated without it until at least tenth grade. It was just so easy to get, I didn't consider *not* using it. You go on Pornhub and there's all these categories you can go through. And being able to reach the normal stuff and the weird stuff equally easily was crazy." Cole, the guy from the previous chapter who is now attending a military academy, recalled, "I have a friend who was a legend among the high school crew team. He claimed that he'd stopped using porn completely. He said, 'I just close my eyes and use my imagination.' We were like, 'Whoa! How does he do that?'"

With such infinite variety, boys didn't limit themselves to just one or two videos at a time: "What I do is, I have three or four favorite sites," explained a junior at an East Coast college. "I look at all the thumbnails on the first couple of pages to see what seems good. Then I open the tabs for those videos on the first site, then the second site, and so on. Then I go back and forth between them, skimming through until I find something that really gets me off." Using porn was so effortless, so reflexive, that, sometimes, he found himself gravitating to it when he didn't intend to. "My fingers will just start clicking and I'll be like, 'Wait, no! I meant to go on CNN! I didn't want to go on Pornhub! But it doesn't matter. I do it whenever I'm bored, depressed, stressed out—whenever I need something to do."

Although all the boys I met had watched porn—one equated his morning session to sneezing—they didn't all relate to it in the same way. A small group, after some experimentation, had

rejected explicit media entirely. "In middle school, porn was considered cool," a senior at a Southern California high school told me. "Guys knew the names of porn stars. And I watched it almost because it was like the unknown—like the same impulse that makes me want to climb a rock or go to a forest. But pretty quickly, I was like, 'This is just so fucked up.' What's on the screen isn't actually *sensual*, not for either person. And often the only part that's touching between the two people is their genitals. That's literally all that's touching. And I was like, 'What am I watching?' It doesn't make sense to me, how you can look at a woman with tremendous respect and then go watch porn. So I stopped."

A second group felt that their porn use had no effect on them, many of them asserting, "I can tell the difference between fantasy and reality." That, as it happens, is the instinctive response people give to any suggestion of media influence. None of us wants to think we're so impressionable, though we're quick to recognize that others are (several of the boys I interviewed made grim predictions about the impact of iPhones, video games, social media, and porn on "the next generation," by which they meant their slightly younger siblings). But decades of research show that what we consume becomes part of our psyches, unconsciously affecting how we feel, think, and behave. When false information is embedded into a fictional story, people will come to believe it (yes, reader, you would, too), and those beliefs are strengthened over time. Consider the college students who were given a short story containing the bogus "fact" that exercise weakens the heart and lungs. When questioned directly afterward, they were unconvinced this was true, but two weeks later, they had become certain it was. Karen Dill-Shackleford, a media psychologist at Fielding Graduate University, speculates that there is something

about the way we suspend disbelief when swept up in a story that opens us to uncritically and even permanently accepting its reality (that theory also partly explains both the spread of fake news and why the repetition of obvious lies can be a successful ploy for political candidates).

Still, assessing porn's impact isn't easy. For one thing, as with many issues related to teens' sexual health, the subject is not exactly a fount of research funds; designing an ethical study, especially given that minors aren't supposed to be watching in the first place, would be a challenge. What's more, disentangling porn's influence from that of family, peers, school, and mainstream media is tricky. Much of what is known is more correlative than causal. Even so, the findings are noteworthy. On the upside, there's some indication that porn has a liberalizing effect: heterosexual male users, for instance, are more likely than their peers to approve of same-sex marriage. On the other hand, they're also less likely to support affirmative action for women and to disagree with or only tepidly endorse the statement "I want there to be equal numbers of men and women who are leaders in work, politics, and life." And it only goes downhill from there. College students who regularly consume porn (which some researchers define as as infrequently as once a month, a bar so low that it made boys I spoke to either blanch or burst out laughing) are *more* likely than others to consider its portrayal of sex to be realistic. Porn use has been associated with boys' real-life badgering of girls for nude pictures. Both boys and girls who consume porn at younger ages are more likely to become sexually active sooner than peers (although greater media use of any kind—TV, internet, music, movies, video games—is associated with precocious sexuality regardless of race, gender, or parents' education), to have more partners, to have higher rates of pregnancy, to view

sexual aggression more positively and women more negatively, and to engage in the riskier and more atypical behaviors porn depicts. Heterosexual anal sex, for example, has historically been vastly more common in porn than in reality (and usually shown as easy, clean, safe, and, perhaps after some initial protest, pleasurable for women), but that ratio is starting to shift. In 1992, 16 percent of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old women in the US reported trying it; by 2009, that percentage had risen to forty; 20 percent of eighteen- to nineteen-year-old girls now report having engaged in anal sex and about one in seventeen fourteen- to seventeen-year-olds (most, by the way, do not use condoms).

I'm not trying to demonize a particular behavior, but it's important to look at young people's motivations as well as the quality of their experience. A 2014 survey of anal sex among heterosexuals ages sixteen to eighteen found that for boys, porn was a driving factor. They viewed the act not as something to share with a partner, whom they believed would need to be (and could be) coerced into it, but as a form of competition with one another. Their strategies included a "try it and see" approach: inserting their finger or penis into a girl's rectum without her consent and hoping she'd acquiesce. (*The Mindy Project* did an entire episode on this, in which the star's boyfriend claimed, "It slipped.") One boy said he would simply keep at it until he wore a girl down and she'd "get fed up and let you do it anyway."

Another finding: among heterosexual women, including those who currently watch the same levels of porn, sexual submissiveness and compliance were correlated with the age at which they first started viewing. According to Paul Wright, an associate professor of media at Indiana University who conducted that research, "It suggests that if I'm female and I see porn at a very young age, I see, *This is what sex is.* So later on, I'm going to

initiate that behavior because I think that's what a guy wants. Or if he wants to do something, I'll be more likely to just go along with it. If I start viewing when I'm older, I'm more like, 'Um, this is what people do in porn, not what they do in real life.' So if a guy is like, 'Hey! Can I strangle you and come on your face?' they're more likely to say, 'Go to hell.' That's our explanation, anyway. We don't know for sure."

Although Wright has yet to analyze his data on men, he hypothesizes a similar association between age of first porn use and expressions of sexual dominance. His previous coauthored research found associations both in the US and internationally between porn consumption and men's desire to engage in a range of aggressive behaviors, especially if the men drank regularly before sex. Among male college students, porn use has been correlated with seeing sex as a purely physical experience; regarding girls as "playthings," objects of conquest rather than people; and measuring virility, social status, and self-worth by the ability to score with "hot" women. College students of both sexes who report recent porn consumption have repeatedly been found to be more likely than others to believe "rape myths": that only strangers commit sexual assault or that the victim "asked for it" by drinking too much or wearing "slutty" clothing or by going out alone.

What may be of more immediate concern to guys themselves, though, is that male porn users report *less* satisfaction than others with their sex lives, their own performance in bed, and their female partners' bodies—and the effect becomes apparent among those who indulge as rarely as a few times a year. There is even speculation that because of its convenience as well as low physical and emotional investment—porn never rejects you, never makes demands of you, never wants you to talk about

your feelings—the rise in porn use is partially responsible for the lower rates of intercourse among millennials: not, I imagine, quite the victory abstinence-only advocates were going for. That reduction of pleasure in partnered sex was what concerned the majority of my interviewees. Even when they felt their porn habit was at reasonable levels, more than half had, at one point or another, cut back on their use, much the way they would if they were drinking too much or smoking too much weed. A high school senior in New England told me he took a break when he found himself daydreaming during math class about a female friend who sat across from him, and realized that he wasn't fantasizing about what she'd look like naked, or even what it might be like to have sex with her. "I was thinking about what she'd look like with cum on her face," he said. "That was a wake-up call for me."

Reza, a sophomore at a Boston college, believed porn increased his awareness of real women's physical imperfections. "I've got things narrowed down to a very, very specific body type that turns me on," he explained. "Like the size of the areola and its color, that sort of thing. It's probably not all driven by porn, but I figured out what I liked from that and I think I wouldn't have otherwise. It doesn't ruin my relationships, but it's not nice when I'm trying to talk my girlfriend into liking a part of her body, but I'm secretly thinking, *Well, actually, I would prefer . . .*" And Kevin, a high school junior from Kentucky, said that after masturbating to "all those skinny white women" (he's Caucasian), he was having a hard time becoming aroused by his African American girlfriend's body, which was neither of those things. "I still watch porn five or more times a week, though," he admitted. "It's so easy, and I'm a lusty, young teenager. But sometimes I wonder if I'm only depriving myself of a better sexual relationship and that's kind of depressing."

Some boys fretted more over their own bodies' contours than their partners', especially (and perhaps not surprisingly) their penis size. That has always been true, to a degree, but porn has exacerbated the issue. "Everyone watches porn and then gets super nervous about their dick size," confided a college sophomore in Chicago. "I mean, it's brutal. Like if you're in the locker room, you're going to turn around and try to hide yourself, or you're not going to change in front of other guys." Some responded by shaving their genital area: as with girls, porn was creating new expectations around hair removal, though for different reasons. Girls generally cited a concern (however inaccurate) about hygiene along with a fear of humiliation by male partners; boys thought it would make their penises look larger. The results weren't always what they'd hoped. "No one told me that if I did it, I'd look like a baby," one high school senior said. "I looked down and it was like I hadn't gone through puberty yet!"

A few boys were so concerned about size that they avoided sexual situations. "I had a girlfriend in tenth grade," Mitchell, in Los Angeles, said, "and as we started being more sexual I became very nervous about the idea of getting erect and about being . . . *sufficient.* I couldn't get hard during our first real sexual experience because that was so much on my mind. And once you feel like you can't get it up, you can't. You're done." For a year, Mitchell declined his girlfriend's offers to perform oral sex on him, afraid that if she saw his penis, she'd be disappointed. "She was like, 'What kind of guy wouldn't want head?'" he recalled. "It was hurtful." With time, and maybe a little maturity, he got past it. In retrospect, he said, "Comparing myself to porn was obviously ridiculous. But, you know, it's also kind of understandable."

Like every boy I spoke with, Mitchell claimed to know that, *of course,* porn wasn't realistic. But that line between fact and

fiction was less clear; after all, porn is depicting *something*, and what other point of reference do young people have? "If you're a teenage guy and you don't have much sexual experience, and you've been watching porn or watching HBO at two a.m. for the past six or seven years, you can develop almost a . . . *fear*, really," said a college sophomore in North Carolina. "A fear that you would not be able to perform up to those standards, though, of course, no one really can. But maybe the starkest contrast is your perception of the kind of feedback that you're going to be getting from a girl. Like that they will be moaning and having orgasms all over the place. That's obviously not the case."

For a small but significant group of the boys I met—one that included Mason, the guy with the flip phone—porn use had become a compulsion, one they felt had seriously harmed them. Some had gone deep into the world of fetish videos, unearthing clips of, say, men eating women for erotic pleasure, or the reverse (I am not referring to oral sex here, but cannibalism). Some had, at least for a time, joined the "no fap" movement ("fapping" being vernacular for masturbation), becoming "fapstronauts" who forswore self-love entirely in order to "retrain" their brains. I can't say whether porn obsession itself was the primary issue for these boys or a preexisting personality trait that found its expression there. What was important, though, and consistent, was that they believed porn had been damaging in ways that no adult had ever discussed with them, and that they had never previously discussed with an adult.

The New Sex Ed

Mason's parents never talked to him about sex, sexual ethics, or healthy relationships; that was true of most of the boys I met, but

some felt their parents had nonetheless led by example, through the loving, respectful, even playful ways they interacted with each other. That was not the case for Mason. His parents hadn't slept in the same room since he was in elementary school. At one point, they didn't speak for an entire year. His father mocked his mother, spoke over her when she talked, ridiculed her opinions. Mason encouraged her to divorce him, but as a devout Catholic, she refused.

Meanwhile, as puberty loomed, Mason became curious. His teachers repeated abstinence-only platitudes; his parents were silent. Inevitably, then, he turned to the modern-day street corner: the internet. In seventh grade, he Googled "Playboy" (which one guy I spoke with referred to as "What's it called, you know, that famous porn magazine with photos and stuff?"), a search that, when I tried it, instantly returned dozens of images of partially nude, fully acquiescent women: a minor reality TV celebrity dressed in sneakers and a white bikini bottom, her tank top pulled down to expose one nipple; a big-bootied woman squatting in a thong and "fuck me" pumps, shot from behind, her face turned coyly to the viewer; a woman straddling a rear-facing chair, her legs stretched wide, wearing only tuxedo cuffs, a bow tie, and bunny ears; another in lacy panties, crawling toward the camera on all fours, licking one raised hand as if it were a cat's paw. All of them with identically dyed blond, flowing manes; flawless, oiled skin; ample breasts; full bottoms. All of them seeming to make direct eye contact with the viewer, pouting invitingly. At the same time, though, the photos were only marginally more explicit than an average music video, and some not even that. Next, Mason tried making an end run around his parents' safe search filters by slightly misspelling terms: say, "big bobbs." That got him further. He had his first orgasm at fourteen, watching a video of a naked

woman trickling water onto her breasts. And that, he said, was when "the whole spiral started. At first it was simple things like a girl in a pool. Then it was people having sex. Lesbian stuff. Anything in the 'Big Tits' category. Anal stuff. Double penetration. I'm sure I've seen a few things involving every fetish category. I've seen some crazy shit."

One night, Mason was sitting on the basement couch, browsing porn on his school-supplied iPad, when his dad walked in.

"You shouldn't be watching that," his father told him. "It's bad for you."

As it happened, Mason had recently snooped on the older man's laptop and found a trove of bookmarked porn. So he snapped back: "Don't be a hypocrite. I've seen all the stuff *you* watch."

Without another word, his father plopped onto the couch and turned on an episode of *Bob's Burgers*. When it was over, he went upstairs to bed. End of discussion. "I feel he sort of failed me," Mason said. "I kind of wish . . . Even after I fired back at him, there was still an opportunity for him to have that conversation with me. Maybe if he had said, 'This will skew the way you view women. It's not real. And it's not going to help you get a girl; it's only going to keep you from interacting with girls in a healthy manner,' that might have made a difference for me. But my parents were too fearful to actually deal with any of it."

By his sophomore year of high school, Mason was spending about an hour a day immersed in porn. He watched in his bedroom. He watched in the den. He watched in the bathroom stalls at school. He watched at parties. It was, he said, as integral to his life as brushing his teeth, eating, drinking, sleeping. "You can spend so much time in this porn fantasy world that you don't even look up and live your real life," he said. Once, he popped

in his earbuds and scrolled through his downloads in the back of the family car after a dentist appointment (no drilling jokes, please), as his brother and mom chatted in the front seat. "That's how normalized it became," he said. "If it was going to be thirty minutes in the car, I might as well watch porn."

Although at this point Mason had never kissed a girl or even held hands, he said that he half expected that at any moment a "hot woman" would appear out of nowhere and demand to have sex with him. "That was my whole perception of how it was supposed to go," he said. "In porn, women are portrayed as these sexually driven animals. It's all they want; it's all they care about. It warped my perception for so long." He didn't realize how much, though, until, at age sixteen, while surfing a Russian social network that allowed him to circumvent his parents' safety filters, he watched a video of a woman defecating into a hotdog bun. She poured condiments on the result and handed it to a second woman, who ate it.

I asked Mason if he found that arousing.

"It was, kind of," he admitted. "Outside of that specific context, I would find this obviously disgusting act to be repulsive. I *do* find it repulsive. But it was being portrayed as extremely sexual. That's what porn does. Just media in general. Sexualizes anything. Sexualizes people eating poop. And it boggles my mind how easy it was to be drawn in by it all."

ALTHOUGH MASON VIEWED more porn and more extreme content than most of the boys I talked to, he was hardly alone. "I don't consider the porn I watch to be representative of the person I am," said Daniel, a freshman at an elite Midwestern college. Daniel had a lantern jaw and hipster glasses; he wore a backward

baseball cap that he continually adjusted, running a hand over his curly hair. "Like, the whole category of 'Unwilling' [women who say no to sex, then change their mind when 'force fucked']. It's very appealing to me even though I know it's wrong. And I do truly believe it's wrong. I would never do it. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy watching it." Daniel was from Michigan and grew up in a very different family from Mason's: his parents were happily married, and they identified, at least nominally, as Jewish. His mom, an instructor at a community college, was a feminist. In real life, Daniel was consciously trying to curb his use of the thoughtlessly sexist, homophobic language that had been common in his high school. He also said he considered any form of sexual interaction to have "spiritual significance" and claimed to prize intimacy over "raw sex."

But that's not what got him off. He'd had three hookups in college; while he could get an erection, he wasn't able to orgasm in any of them. He'd also found it "a bit of a struggle" to climax during intercourse with his high school girlfriend, with whom he'd been in love. Their sex wasn't stimulating enough; it wasn't intense enough—it just wasn't *enough.* "I felt like I was never really satisfied," he said. "There was always more to try. Like, 'Oh, this is pretty good, she's letting me do a lot, but we haven't done *this* yet, we haven't done *this*, done *this*, done *this* . . .'" The girl herself, who was a year younger than him, also seemed to have taken her cues from porn. She would writhe and moan when Daniel jackhammered a finger into her vagina. When he told her he wanted to "take a break" from their relationship, she offered up anal sex to change his mind (although that idea could equally have been inspired by mainstream films such as *Kingsman*, in which the hero's incentive for saving a Scandinavian princess is her promise that "we can do it in the asshole"). He accepted, but

the experience was nothing like what he'd seen on-screen. "It was really difficult," he recalled, "and it hurt her intensely. She was in pain. That was nothing I wanted to see. It was fucked up. And I felt like shit afterward."

The two did eventually split up, briefly; they reunited after a round of rough sex in an elementary school parking lot, during which he choked her, pulled her hair, and, at her request, slapped her across the breasts. That was the first time Daniel climaxed without using his hand. "It was the best sex we ever had," he recalled. Certainly, people have predilections, but it's troubling that both instances of aggressive sex Daniel recounted happened when his girlfriend believed their relationship was in jeopardy. Daniel himself considers his behavior to be contrary to the intimacy he claims to crave. He doesn't know whether that disconnect is natural, part of his wiring as a sexual person, or shaped by his repeated consumption of prepackaged fantasies.

As another boy, a high school senior in San Francisco, put it, "I think porn affects your ability to be innocent in a sexual relationship. The whole idea of exploring sex without any preconceived ideas of what it is, you know? That natural organic process has just been fucked by porn."

We tend to believe that genital response—becoming erect for men, lubricating for women—is synonymous with arousal, but that's not always true. Those are automatic physiological reactions. Emily Nagoski, a professor of health behavior who studies the science of desire, likens it to being tickled by someone who infuriates you: your laughter is involuntary; it doesn't signal enjoyment. For men, the overlap between blood flow to the genitals and "turned-on" feelings is only 50 percent—which sounds low, until you hear that for women it's a mere 10 percent. The fancy, scientific term for this is "non-concordance" and it's why a

woman can, say, orgasm during a disliked sexual activity, including rape: despite what *Fifty Shades of Grey* (or some politicians) would have you believe, that does not make her "in denial" of her secret wishes. Similarly, a man may be sickened by an image that makes his penis rise; that isn't the biological version of a poker tell. Bodies react to what is perceived as sexually *relevant*, Nagoski said, not necessarily to what's sexually *wanted*, appealing, or enjoyable (you can also experience the inverse: finding something sexy without having a genital reaction). When a boy gets an erection in response to scatological porn or a report of rape in his campus newspaper, then, it doesn't necessarily mean he's into it; his body may just be acknowledging something involving sex is afoot.

That said, when something is both sexual and taboo, such as eroticized violence or extreme degradation, it can trigger a mental process similar to the one that makes you obsessed with polar bears as soon as you're told not to think about them. "Embedded in the idea 'Don't respond to that sexually relevant information,'" Nagoski explained, "is the idea '*Respond* to that sexually relevant information.'" The tension of that contradiction can turbocharge arousal, making something objectionable *more* exciting than that which is overtly desired. For adolescents, whose brains (not to mention hearts) are still developing and acutely influenced by early exposure, the impact can be significant. While porn isn't "addictive" in any classical sense, their sexual response can be conditioned, trained to be narrowly and exclusively triggered by its images—even when (or perhaps especially when), like Daniel, they find those images offensive. The answer is not to stop masturbating, Nagoski emphasized, but to do so in a much wider variety of contexts—using one's imagination, reading sexy books (she suggests romance novels,

which have become both more explicit and more realistic about female pleasure) with a romantic partner in the room, using techniques beyond a porn-induced "death grip" on the penis—and learning to differentiate between what is highly arousing and what is actually enjoyable.

Most of the boys I talked to had instinctively backed away from the web's more gonzo options, especially any they felt were "rapey." Even so, disturbing content—or what would once have passed for disturbing content—can break through. After one boy told me that he liked to look up blow jobs on Tumblr, I checked it out, and somehow ended up with a GIF of a woman fellating a dog. That brief exposure is something I can never unsee, and, truly, I felt it degraded my humanity. "I'd say my exposure to porn has desensitized me to normal or vanilla sex," a high school senior in San Francisco told me. "But that's also a function of the access my generation has to the internet in general. Having spent enough time and seen enough gore, I have become utterly indifferent to even the most graphic sex and violence. Nothing in porn is shocking or weird to me. It's entertainment, like an action movie."

In an oversaturated media marketplace, attention is the most prized currency. The best way for porn to capture and keep its share is to perpetually up the ante on aggressive and cruel acts—face fucking! Bukkake! Stealth "creampie"!—none of which are likely to result in orgasm for most women. Quite the opposite: some recent porn trends are so physically demanding that female performers later require surgery to repair prolapsed vaginal walls or anuses (there is little regard for women's safety on set, and certainly no worker's comp or disability pay). Porn is also pushed to extremes by conventional media, which has become ever more explicit in its own quest to lure viewers. Even so, most

heterosexual porn still centers on "the big six": digital stimulation of the vagina by a partner, self-stimulation (by either sex), fellatio, cunnilingus, and coitus. Those acts tend to appear together, according to Bryant Paul, an associate professor of media psychology at Indiana University who studies the impact of porn. So if you see one in a clip, you're likely to see them all. But "the big six" also often cluster with certain, harsher acts: men spitting on women, "facial abuse" oral sex, anal sex. What's more, specific behaviors don't tell the whole story. Pornhub's front page features the most popular videos in a viewer's home country; in the United States (the world's biggest consumer of adult content) that means an array of pseudo-incest porn (stepmothers, stepsiblings, teenage "besties" who have sex with each other's "dads"). Even if the sex itself is fairly routine, the taboo that it flirts with to amp up arousal—the fantasy it promotes, reinforces, and possibly normalizes—is not.

Paul has also found that, depending on the context and intensity, young adults don't always register aggression in porn. They'll notice if it's integral to a particular scenario, such as BDSM, or a woman being choked while crying; but when the aggression is "light" during high-intensity sex—slapping, hitting, choking, hair-pulling, name-calling—and less central to the action, they retain no memory of it. "We had them rate various acts before they watched the clips, so we knew they perceived them as aggressive," he said. "But when we'd say, 'Name all the aggressive behaviors you just saw,' they would say, 'I didn't see any.' So, we tried asking, 'Did you see any of the following acts?' and listing them, but they didn't even get it when we put it that way." What could that mean? "One possibility is they literally aren't noticing because it's not what they're there to see," Paul suggested. A more likely explanation, though, involves something

called "priming theory": how media of any type unconsciously promote certain associations in the mind. "So if you're noticing these things implicitly," Paul said, "but are disregarding them because it's not what interests you, it's not what you're there to see, that could lead to the 'prime' of 'ignore microaggressions toward women.'" Or, potentially, to "ignore not-so-micro aggressions": it may, for example, partly explain why men who use porn regularly, as mentioned earlier, are less favorably inclined toward affirmative action for women or toward equality in political and professional life.

It's Not the Sex; It's the Sexism

Obviously, media "primes" about gender and sexuality don't come exclusively from porn. They're found in video games, advertising, movies, TV, music videos, song lyrics. "The entire Adult Swim lineup [on the Cartoon Network] probably has more potential to influence people's beliefs about sex than porn," Bryant Paul commented. "Because it's mainstream, which makes it seem more acceptable. It's kind of like how twenty years ago, if you read something in *Hustler*, you'd know it was fantasy, but if you read the same thing in *Maxim* you might try to incorporate it into your bag of tricks." So, while an episode of *Family Guy* in which bikini-clad Asian women are accidentally released from a character's garage and car trunk (*hilarious!*) may not make viewers believe it's okay to take Asian women hostage, it may well contribute to more readily treating them as objects than white women. Although porn has become a lightning rod for concern, then, it may really be more a symptom than the disease itself. Nor is its sexual explicitness an inherent problem: it's the persistent depiction of

women as things, and in degrading and compliant roles—less the *sex* than the *sexism*. And that is abundantly on display in the mainstream media boys consume throughout their lives.

There is broad agreement that the incessant sexualization of women in media hurts girls. Even a brief exposure—to two thirty-second advertising spots embedded in a four-minute reel—has been found to undermine body image, erode self-esteem, and trigger self-objectification. Yet, rarely do we discuss how those one-dimensional images of women influence *boys'* perceptions of female peers: the truth is, it affects them profoundly. One clue as to how can be found in a 2000 study by researchers from the University of Massachusetts. They edited together scenes from the R-rated movies *Showgirls* and *9½ Weeks* that were judged as degrading to women, depicting them as objects to be exploited or manipulated sexually. None contained violence—they included scenes of a striptease, of a blindfolded woman—but they emphasized male dominance as well as female submission and availability. They also portrayed male, but not female, sexual satisfaction. Half the college-age participants watched those clips, and the other half, the control group, watched a cartoon from an animation festival. Afterward, both groups read a magazine account of either acquaintance or stranger rape. While there was little difference in their response to the stranger scenario, the men who watched the degrading videos were more than twice as likely as the control group to agree with the statement that the victim enjoyed the acquaintance rape and secretly "got what she wanted." The effect held steady regardless of the men's attitudes toward gender roles or sexually explicit material. Such sexualized images, again and again, appear to "spill over" and affect men's perceptions of all women. In another experiment, men who had been shown objectified images of women were asked to

rate the competence and intelligence of a female researcher for an unrelated task; they gave her lower marks than men who'd been shown neutral images.

From the earliest ages, children are subject to messages that present women primarily as objects for male use, as rewards for victory, wealth, and fame; messages that disregard women's perspective and inaccurately represent their gratification. Parents of little girls may surround their daughters with books and movies and images of complex female characters in an effort to offset all that, but rarely do parents of boys do the same: the distorted depiction of women in media is seen as a problem for girls alone. Yet little boys watch professional sports, where the sole women on the field are cheerleaders. Female characters in family-friendly, G-rated films are depicted in revealing clothing at about the same rate as in R-rated films. That, of course, is when women or girls are present at all. Despite their rising visibility in franchises such as *The Twilight Saga*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Star Wars*, by 2018 only 31 percent of top-grossing Hollywood films featured female protagonists—a record high!—and women comprised just 35 percent of all speaking roles, a figure that has held steady over the ten years researchers have tracked it.

By their teens and twenties, boys consume content from men's lifestyle brands whose presentation of female sexuality is not always so very different from porn's: study participants presented with quotes from popular "lad" magazines mixed with those by convicted rapists were unable to reliably distinguish between the two; they actually ranked the former as more derogatory. "[Such publications] give the appearance that sexism is acceptable and normal," the researchers concluded, adding that "the legitimization strategies that rapists deploy when they talk about women are more familiar to these young men than we had anticipated."

Rape is routinely used as a plot device on premium cable programs that draw a huge teen audience, such as *Game of Thrones* or *Westworld*, where it is presented as a presumed male fantasy. Movies and TV shows such as *Fight Club, The Godfather, The Wolf of Wall Street, Empire, Billions*, and *Silicon Valley*—all iconic among high school and college guys—consistently define masculinity through wealth and dominance; the worst (and often cleverest) slurs against other men invoke femininity, homosexuality, sexual submission, or rape. Weak men are "pussies"; a person beneath contempt is "fucked" or in the position to "suck my dick." Aside from the occasional tough bitch who trumpets the size of her own balls (the MBA version of Gillian Flynn's "cool girl"), women are invisible, love interests, sex workers, or trophies through which men assert power over other men. Nor is it generally clear whether the point is to critique that culture or to celebrate it. Women in *The Wolf of Wall Street*—prostitutes, strippers, generic hot chicks from central casting—are portrayed as the rightful spoils of success (and excess). Until its creators were shamed by the internet, *Silicon Valley*'s cast included precisely one woman: the only conventionally "hot" character on the show, she was an assistant (neither a programmer nor even an executive) who played Wendy to a start-up's lost boys. The show's continual stream of phallic humor, while indisputably funny, cements as much as satirizes brogrammer culture. *Billions*, too, reinforces the behavior it purports to expose. Misogynist barbs, pornification, and the marginalization or objectification of female characters are all so pervasive that it's hard to identify just one (or two or three or five) examples. Though one can try: there is the character who is nicknamed "Pouch" because "he's got no balls. They say he has a vagina." Or the one who yells, "You wouldn't know the right thing to do if it kneeled down and sucked your tiny goddamn cock!"

Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. Boys *know* such sentiments are wrong—they are not completely blank slates for the culture to inscribe. Still, they are barraged by these images and ideas, usually without challenge or context. About half of boys ages ten to nineteen say that at least several times a week on TV, in movies, in music videos, or on YouTube they see unrealistic images of women's bodies or women whose bodies and looks are portrayed as more important than their brains or abilities (and, frankly, a mere *half* of boys seems low). Nearly half also see female video game characters portrayed as "hot" and a quarter see such characters every day. "I've been watching the show *Californication* lately," said Mason, the guy with the flip phone. "I think in some ways it's more damaging than things that are incredibly unrealistic. Because it's just *slightly* unrealistic. It's still kind of believable. Like, the main character has sex with everyone wherever he goes. His character has such a good build, it's believable. But every girl in the show is a topless, sex-crazed fiend, and every dude is sex-crazed as well. And, I don't know. They make it seem so *convincing*. Whereas if you were to watch a porn video where a dude comes in with his dick in a pizza box, it's like, 'All right, obviously that isn't going to happen in real life.' Also *Californication*—it's on regular TV; it's not porn. So you believe that more." Even a show like *Modern Family*, Mason added, which was one of his favorites in high school, includes Gloria, the dumbed-down, hypersexualized (though secretly smart!) bombshell who is essentially a latter-day Charo. "Whatever media you turn to," he said, "however family friendly it is, it's always sexualizing women. It's inescapable."

Remember, media scripts influence real-life emotions and behavior, *even when we think they don't*. And the media scripts boys consume from childhood onward are continuously objectifying, demeaning, hostile, inimical, or indifferent to women and present

masculinity as inherently antagonistic toward femininity. No wonder that, in 2017, the first woman credited as writer on an episode of the animated Adult Swim hit *Rick and Morty* was inundated by rape and death threats from the show's male fans (its creator, Dan Harmon, himself later acknowledged that he'd sexually harassed and attempted to destroy the career of a female underling with whom he worked on a previous series). As many as two-thirds of female journalists (this one included) have also been harassed online, receiving threats of rape and murder or nasty comments about their appearance. Female gamers and Twitch streamers are subject to a torrent of misogynist vitriol. Video games, incidentally, are now a $140 billion annual global business, as opposed to Hollywood's mere $38 billion; players' exposure to sexual objectification and violence against women within them has been associated (it begins to feel tedious to report it *yet again*) with higher rates of sexism, "rape-supportive" attitudes among men, and tolerance of sexual harassment. Playing sexually charged video games for as little as twenty-five minutes has been correlated with an increased tendency among college men to say they would engage in "inappropriate sexual advances"—that's particularly striking, given that, in a laboratory setting, boys would presumably want to portray themselves to researchers as more principled than they might, in fact, be.

Then, of course, there is hip-hop, which in 2017 became, for the first time, the most popular music genre in the US and attracts the youngest audience. Like porn, video games, and mainstream media, the category is both broad and deep, encompassing Kendrick Lamar as well as Migos; Dope Saint Jude and Nicki Minaj. Historically a crucible of creative social protest, in its most commercially successful, corporate form, it earns billions annually by distorting black masculinity, exploiting black

women's bodies, and degrading female sexuality. "I think music has some of the biggest impact on how guys treat girls," a high school senior in the Bay Area told me. "In the car, my friends and I listen to all this stuff that's just 'fuck that bitch and then quit her' over and over. When you hear that, like, five, six, ten times a day, it makes it hard to escape having that mind-set." Tricia Rose, director of the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America at Brown University, refers to the "gangsta-pimp-ho trinity" whose most devoted fans are typically white, suburban boys who may never have personally known an African American. She has written that although hip-hop didn't invent sexism, nor is it the first musical style to profit from it, its power, imagination, and fusion of materialism with strip-club culture has made misogyny "sexy, visible and funky. . . . And, frankly, if you want to find openly celebrated sexism against black women, there is no richer contemporary source than commercial, mainstream hip-hop."

Some male artists, as they've aged, have expressed passing regret for their earlier attitudes. In January 2018, Jay-Z spoke out in support of the #MeToo movement, despite having used the word "bitch" in 109 of his 217 songs (at that time), building his early brand with lines like "I'm a pimp in every sense of the word, bitch." Nas, who once penned lyrics about urinating "on bitches who famous" and "putting stitches in they anus" lamented in his song "Daughters" that "God" gets revenge on the "coolest playas and foulest heartbreakers" by making them fathers of "precious little girls." And on his 2018 single "Violent Crimes," Kanye West described "niggas" as "savage" "monsters," "pimps," and "players" until they have daughters. Then, "Father forgive me," he wrote, also appealing to a higher power, "I'm scared of the karma." All three men changed their literal tunes after becoming dads. Certainly, any positive change is commendable, and I'm glad

they've seen some hazy form of the light, but as culture critic Dara Mathis tweeted about West, "Daughters are not spiritual retribution for your misogyny." They are neither a form of punishment (among other things, what would that make sons?) nor "tiny spiritual guides sent to newly show you the humanity of girls and women." Nor did Ye's hand-wringing ultimately amount to much. Six months after "Violent Crimes" debuted, he dropped "I Love It," with Lil Pump. In the video, as they repeat "You're such a fuckin' ho, I love it," the two men shuffle down a hall lined with alcoves containing naked, faceless women who have been forced to their knees, their hands behind their backs, presumably bound. The only real difference between that—which was the biggest-ever global hip-hop debut on YouTube—and actual porn is that Kanye's video was produced by the mainstream Warner Brothers and performed, albeit with more TV-friendly lyrics, on *Saturday Night Live.*

The Body Is a Vulnerable Thing

"I'm not going to lie," Mason said. "I feel kind of like I'm playing catch-up when it comes to where other people are at in terms of their sexual experiences."

Porn did not accelerate Mason's real-life sexual pursuits. Quite the opposite. He even avoided the simple act of kissing for much of high school, afraid that without "experience" he would do it wrong. Nothing he'd seen on screen prepared him for how awkward real-life encounters could be, or how to navigate them with a partner. He thought he was just supposed to *know.* Mason's high school girlfriend performed oral sex on him for the first time when they were seniors largely, he suspects, out of guilt for

refusing intercourse (her "no" as he prepared to enter her was so soft he almost didn't hear it). Since they never talked about it, though, he can't say for sure. At any rate, he lost his erection during the act, so she stopped and they got dressed in silence.

So, I asked Mason, when did you have intercourse for the first time?

He gazed up at the ceiling, fiddled with the pompon on his hat, squinted as if he were trying to recall. Finally, he said, "Friday."

"You mean, five days ago?" I replied.

He nodded.

He'd met the girl, Jeannie, just a few weeks before at a party; they'd both been so high on a strain of weed called "God's Pussy" that they couldn't get off the couch. Once they'd rallied, she invited him back to her dorm and they started fooling around. When she straddled him in preparation for intercourse, though, he went soft. He blamed the weed—though it's not actually clear whether marijuana affects erections the way alcohol can—but to me he admitted he was also scared. So they cuddled and kissed for a while longer, then Mason left.

The next afternoon, Jeannie texted him to ask whether he'd like to hook up again. This time he stayed sober, but he was still anxious: What if he couldn't get it up? The more he thought about that, the more anxious he became. When he tried to put on a condom, he lost his erection again.

"You don't have to be nervous," Jeannie said.

Mason hedged: "It's just the aftereffect of the weed from yesterday," he told her. No biggie. Or, he said, maybe it was a "contact high" from being around some friends who'd been dabbing earlier in the evening. He knew the lie was lame. But Jeannie seemed so confident, so comfortable in her body. She could talk

about her desires and her limits. She was emotionally open and expressive. It scared the crap out of him. "I thought, *Damn! This girl's got everything figured out!*" he said. "And I'm over here trying to get over the trauma of years of porn usage, trying to differentiate between what I like in the fantasy world versus what I actually enjoy in real life."

A week later, Mason went to see Jeannie act in a play on campus. Again, they went back to her dorm. This time Mason declined to have intercourse out of supposed gallantry: she had another performance the next day and he said he didn't want to keep her up too late.

"Can I ask you a question?" she asked. "Have you ever done it before?"

In the past, Mason would lie in response to that, whether in bed with a partner or, as had recently happened, during a conversation among friends at work. "As a guy, you feel like you should already have had that experience," he told me. "And if you're a virgin, you should dodge the question as much as possible." With Jeannie, it was somehow different. "I decided to just say it," he recalled. "I told her, 'No. I've had sexual experiences but not sex.'"

"Is virginity something you value?" Jeannie asked. "Do you want your first time to be significant?"

Mason thought for a second. "Not really," he said. "I'm happy to have sex if the situation presents itself, but it's not my goal when I meet a girl. It's more like, 'Is she a cool person? Do I enjoy hanging out with her?'"

They continued talking for over an hour; Mason confided in Jeannie about his anxiety, his difficulty expressing emotion. When they began kissing again, suddenly everything clicked. "It felt like this storybook moment," Mason recalled, "because of having an hour conversation beforehand, being able to let

my guard down. It's like, after having that conversation, I felt extremely comfortable being with her. Whatever nerves had affected me the previous times disappeared. And I realized: if I can't be fully vulnerable, mentally and emotionally, it stops me from being able to be vulnerable physically. Because, the naked body, that's a very vulnerable thing, you know?"

Mason looked at me earnestly, and I nodded. It certainly can be. And that's pretty different from what he'd learned from porn or mainstream media. "It sounds like you really connected," I said.

"Yeah," Mason replied. He doesn't know what's going to happen with Jeannie; he doesn't know what he wants to happen. The relationship, such as it is, is young. Maybe it will blossom into something more enduring, maybe it will develop into a consistent hookup, or maybe it will fade away, undefined. Regardless, he's grateful to have met her. Because now, he says, he knows what he's looking for—and he knows he won't find it on a video screen.