

## CHAPTER 3

### Are You Experienced?

#### *Life and Love in a Hookup Culture*

The tiny dorm room was packed with freshmen, the temperature rising along with their voices and the chemical tang of someone's musk body spray. A raucous group played rage cage—a fast-paced drinking game involving Ping-Pong balls and a whole lot of beer—on a table that bisected the room. Students poured vodka shots into *Despicable Me* Dixie cups that had been set out on a desk. The bladder from inside a box of wine was making the rounds, too: the idea was to slap it (for reasons no one could explain), then chug from the spigot as everyone counted: *one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, SEVEN!* “Oldies” from the mid-2000s blasted from borrowed speakers: *Pussy on my mind, tighter than a headband*. Although this was a midsize college on the West Coast, we could have been anywhere: it was a typical Saturday night pregame, the party before the party, where students get pumped up and a little wasted in preparation for heading over to frat row. I had been invited by one of the hosts, Iris,



a fan of *Girls & Sex*, to observe the event. Most of the students ignored me, though a few, assuming I was a professor there to do research, struck up conversations.

A girl in a striped crop top, leggings, and sneakers barreled over, already a little tipsy. "It's so unfair to have a vagina," she complained, once I'd explained my presence. "They're so hard to deal with. For guys, it's just simple. I mean, I've read Judith Butler. I love Judith Butler. I know gender doesn't exist, but still. Girls have to deal with sexism and then on top of it we're so hard to please sexually."

I asked how she thought the boy standing next to us might respond to that. She tapped him on the shoulder. "Do you think as a guy you see the world differently?" she demanded.

He stared at her, confused. "Um, I think as an individual I see the world differently?" he said, then turned his back on her.

"Well," she said, disgusted, "that was a cop-out." She wandered off; when I spotted her again, a few minutes later, she was leaning against a wall, making out with a guy whom, I'd later find out, she had just met.

I watched a different boy, wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the word "apathy," weave through the crowd. He caressed several girls' bare shoulders, dropped his head on another one's chest (she immediately took a step back), hit up someone for her Snapchat. Iris had invited this boy specially; they'd hooked up a couple of times recently and she thought there was potential for something more. Judging by his behavior, though, that wasn't looking likely. He paused next to me, Solo cup in hand, surveying the room. Iris had told him I was writing about hookup culture; he took that to mean I was focused on rape. "Guys are a lot worse at those Big Ten schools," he said. "That's where you see all the assault. It's awful. Here, guys are *respectful*."

"What about Brock Turner?" I countered. "He went to Stanford. That's not a Big Ten school."

"Yeah," a second boy broke in, "but he was an *athlete*. He wasn't there on merit."

A third boy agreed. "It really comes down to communication," he said. "You have to *communicate* with your partner."

I turned to a girl who, had been listening without comment. "Do boys usually 'communicate' with you during a hookup?" I asked.

She grimaced and shook her head.

"I mean, you're usually drunk, right?" I asked the boy.

"Well," he said, "I don't hook up with anyone drunk that I wouldn't get with sober."

"Does 'communicating' also mean you don't just stop talking to a girl after a hookup or ignore her when you see her again?"

He shifted uncomfortably. "Well, um . . ."

"Or that you make sure your partner has an orgasm whether or not you do?"

He glanced longingly toward the group playing rage cage. "Um . . ." he repeated.

The girl interrupted: "The last guy I hooked up with didn't know what a period was," she said. "I told him I thought we wouldn't be able to have sex because I was on my period but then it turned out there was no blood so it was okay. And he was like, 'Does there have to be blood?'" She rolled her eyes. "What does he think it is, a state of mind?" She burst into laughter, taken by her own cleverness.

"But you still had sex with him," I said. "Did you enjoy it?"

She seemed startled, as if I had broken an unspoken rule. "No," she said, no longer laughing. "No, I didn't. Not particularly."



## Anatomy of a Hookup

There are two contradictory trends identified in reports about young people's sex lives: one is that they are virtually celibate, too busy playing *Fortnite*, watching porn, scrolling through Instagram, or otherwise living screen-mediated lives to actually connect with another human being. The other is that "hookup culture" along with a plethora of Tinder-type swipe apps have made sex so accessible that everyone is bed-hopping in a nonstop, booze-fueled bacchanal. The truth lies somewhere in between.

High school and college students are, in fact, having less vaginal intercourse than they were twenty-five years ago (the studies quoted in the press, though, don't ask about oral or anal sex, both of which have become more common), but that's partly because the context in which they indulge has shifted. In a relationship, couples tend to have intercourse regularly; students who engage primarily in hookups, even those they consider "consistent," do so only sporadically—an irony, given the dissonant presumptions about hookup culture.

A moment to define terms: "Hookup," a word high school and college students bandy about incessantly, is intentionally vague. Although it presumes a lack of connection and commitment, beyond that, the details are indeterminate, shifting with age, geography, and personal experience. I once heard college freshmen debate whether a dance floor make-out (DFMO) "counted" as a hookup. It would have in high school, they concluded, but not anymore, though it definitely would if you engaged in the exact same behavior back in someone's room. In reality, around 35 to 40 percent of college hookups include intercourse, which means 60 percent or more do not; about 13 percent involve oral sex (mostly performed by girls on boys); 12 percent consist of

some naked genital touching; and 35 percent—over a third—go no further than kissing and groping. Because of that ambiguity, however, students tend to radically overestimate what their classmates are up to (not to mention allowing others to draw inflated conclusions about their own exploits); that can fuel feelings of inadequacy and FOMO, contributing to pressure to keep pace through undesired sex, coerciveness, or aggression. According to the Online College Social Life Survey, which encompassed more than twenty thousand students nationally, close to three-quarters of both male and female students will hook up at least once by their senior year, engaging in some combination of the above behaviors. The average number of partners? Seven to eight. That's maybe one a semester—not exactly the fall of Rome. Forty percent hook up fewer than three times during their college career, and a full quarter *never* hook up, though 20 percent do hook up ten times or more. The behavior is most common among affluent, white heterosexuals, and predominant in Greek life.

Uncommitted sex in college is certainly nothing new. The real shift, then, is not "hookups" but hookup *culture*: the idea that casual sex is no longer an exception, but that physical intimacy is expected to be the precursor to emotional intimacy rather than its product. Students, both in high school and college, see hooking up as the first step toward a relationship, although most hookups don't result in one. No wonder as many as 85 percent of college students report ambivalence or unhappiness with hookup culture and one in three say their intimate relationships have been "traumatic." According to Lisa Wade, an associate professor of sociology at Occidental College, students express "a deep, indefinable disappointment" in their sexual experiences. "They worry that they're feeling too much or too little. They are frustrated and feel regret, but they're not



ure why." Although some students thrive, most wonder why they aren't having fun yet.

"The sex can feel like two people having two very distinct experiences," observed Andrew, a second-semester freshman in Los Angeles who had hooked up with ten girls since school began and had intercourse with five. "There's not much eye contact. Sometimes you don't even say anything. And it's weird to be so open with a stranger." He paused, searching for a way to encapsulate the experience. "It's like you're *acting* vulnerable, but not actually *being* vulnerable with someone you don't know and don't care very much about. It's not a *problem* for me. It's just—odd. Odd, and not even really fun."

To gird against disappointment—as well as a near-fanatical generational fear of the "awkward"—it's crucial to get hampered. Hence, the pregame. To say that hookup culture is lubricated by alcohol would be a gross understatement: it is *dependent* on binge-drinking to create what Wade calls the "compulsory carelessness" necessary for a hookup. Alcohol is, above all, what establishes a couple's indifference: hooking up is almost by definition *serious*. Inebriation itself—"I was drunk"—can even become the reason (or the excuse) for an encounter, as opposed to, say, attraction, interest, or connection. "In the stairwells of my dorm," Andrew told me, "people will talk about how if you didn't black out, you didn't go out."

Most of the guys I met were acutely aware that sex with an incapacitated person is assault. Yet, since you need to be drunk in order to hook up, the trick becomes being (and finding someone who is) wasted enough to want to do it but sober enough to be able to express a credible "yes." And who is to be the judge of that? "I'm very careful about not doing anything if I'm super drunk," a college freshman in North Carolina told me. "I don't

want to make decisions I'd regret. So I usually limit it to six or seven drinks. But sometimes more." Even so, he woke up one morning about a month into his first semester with no memory of the night before and a strange girl's number entered into his phone. "I was freaking out, but I texted her and she said she'd had fun, so luckily it was all right."

College anti-assault activists are fond of saying, "Don't tell girls not to drink, tell rapists not to rape." Personally, I don't see it as a zero-sum game. As the parent of a daughter, I firmly advocate talking to young women about the unique way female bodies metabolize liquor: drink for drink a girl will become incapacitated more quickly than a guy who is the same size and weight. I also endorse discussing how alcohol reduces power and obscures judgment, making it more difficult to recognize and escape dangerous situations. At the same time, it's clear that we need to be far more active in discussing how guys' alcohol consumption adversely affects *their* judgment, putting them at risk of engaging in the kind of sexual misconduct that could get them suspended or expelled from school—not to mention harming another human being. Alcohol has been shown to diminish boys' ability to read social cues or notice a partner's hesitation. It gives them the nerve they might not otherwise have to use coercion or force to get what they want; drunk guys are more aggressive when they assault and less aware of their victims' distress. Inebriation also makes boys less likely to step in as bystanders than they would be if they were sober.

Guys in my interviews were less likely than girls to express anger, betrayal, resentment, or feelings of being "used" in hookups. That's partly because hookup culture aligns with the values of conventional masculinity: conquest over connection, sex as status-seeking, partners as disposable. While I've met both male and female students who embrace (or reject) that philosophy, it tended



to ultimately advantage boys, an extension of the myriad small, unchallenged ways—in the locker room, in pop culture, in social media, in porn, from their friends, from their own fathers—they learn to see sex as impersonal and female bodies as vehicles for their own gratification. At one end of the spectrum, that sense of entitlement can justify assault, whether premeditated or spontaneous, acknowledged or not. At the other, it typically means indifference toward a female partner's pleasure in a hookup. The Online College Social Life Survey found that between 29 and 53 percent of girls climaxed in their most recent hookup (depending on the combination of acts involved), as opposed to between 56 and 81 percent of boys. That orgasm gap shrinks markedly in relationships, a difference attributed to a combination of familiarity, better communication, sobriety, and—significantly—emotional investment on the male partner's part. In the words of one guy, "It sounds bad, but in a one-time thing, I don't really care." Lisa Wade found that, whether consciously or not, boys signaled a partner's lack of value to them by denying her orgasm and the activities that would most likely produce it (though, at the same time, guys also overestimate women's orgasms in hookups by a third to a half; either out of ego, ignorance, or because the girl faked it). I recalled talking to a high school senior who broke down in tears while telling me that his girlfriend almost never went down on him. "She thinks it's dirty and gross and talks about how it tastes bad," he said. My heart went out to him, it did, especially when he said her rejection made him feel uncared for, unloved. But there was also part of me that recognized the right men feel to sexual pleasure, how dejected and even potentially angry they become when denied it. *After all*, I thought to myself, *you know what an eighteen-year-old girl would call it if a guy wouldn't go down on her? Normal*. There's even some suggestion that, although hookups are explicitly meant to be devoid of feeling, guys in col-

lege use them in part to experience emotional closeness, in however attenuated or fleeting a fashion. If that's true, the differential between the sexes in those encounters is even bigger than previously thought: guys derive both physical *and* emotional satisfaction from hookups, while girls generally experience neither.

For some college men, treating a sexual partner—especially one who was not suitably hot or selective—with roughness or disinterest and then bragging about it the next day became a form of image management, a preemptive strike against potential ridicule, the loss of social currency. So, when boys assured me that their friends, their frat brothers, their classmates would *never* assault a girl (it was always those *other* boys), that could feel like a very low bar: having sex that is technically "legal" is hardly the same as sex that is ethical, mutual, reciprocal, or kind. "Casual sex can be great," a sophomore at a Los Angeles college told me. "But you can forget to treat the other person as a human being."

Boys felt less strongly than girls that the game was rigged against them; still, few felt the competitive, detached nature of hookup culture fully served them. They struggled not only with unexpected feelings of connection and vulnerability, but with other emotions: inadequacy, anxiety, insecurity, confusion, disappointment, embarrassment—none of which, as guys, they felt permission to express. That was especially true in high school, where hookup culture, while less studied (academics tend to focus on college students), truly begins.

## Ws and Ls

Nate, a high school junior from the Bay Area, recalled sinking deeper into the couch, trying to look chill, like he was such



an insider that he didn't need to prove it by standing around with the other kids gathered in Nicole's living room. The party was slowly filling up with students from his high school: first the sophomores, then, later, other juniors and a few seniors. The table next to him was crowded with handles of liquor, beer bottles, and a fruit-flavored malt drink called Great America that was packaged like moonshine, in mason jars. Kids were drinking shots and moking. Some were juuling. "People at my school like to get fucked up, because they have so much pressure on them," he told me. "So at parties they just want to fucking destroy their bodies and feel like they have no inhibitions. There is a lot of getting drunk and there's a lot of 'fun' I don't completely understand." Nate described himself as in the middle of his school's social scene: friends with the "popular" kids, but also with the "lower" kids. "But the hierarchy really centers around who has access to the parties," he explained. "And I do get invited to all the parties." Nate didn't drink much himself, and he never got high: he wasn't morally opposed to it; he just didn't like the feeling of being out of control. So he usually ended up as designated driver, or taking care of the guy who was puking on the sidewalk, or "protecting" a female friend from some wasted, creepy guy's advances, slinging an arm around her shoulder as if making a claim.

He wandered into the kitchen, where his friend Kyle, who was *definitely* cross-faded (that is, both drunk and stoned), stood on a chair aiming the contents of a can of Sprite at a shot glass on the floor below and, much to the amusement of everyone around him, missing entirely. Nate took out his phone and made a Snapchat video.

At sixteen, reputation meant everything to Nate, specifically his reputation as a guy. Certain things, he explained, could cement your status: playing sports, posting funny videos, getting

drunk, and, of course, hooking up. "The whole goal of going to a party is to hook up with girls and then tell your guys about it," he said. "And there's this race for 'experience,' because if you get behind, then by the time you do have the opportunity to hook up with a girl she'll have hit it with, like, five guys already. Then she's going to know how to do things and you won't and that's a problem if she tells people you've got floppy lips or don't know how to get her bra off."

"So, yeah, if you have a girlfriend, that's okay," he continued. "Maybe that's a nine out of ten. But if you can hook up with random girls? That's a ten out of ten. So it's like you *need* to be hooking up to be a man, and you need to be *good* at hooking up to be a man. But how am I supposed to learn how to be 'good' at hooking up without hooking up?"

Nate was a lanky boy with dark, liquid eyes and hair that resisted all attempts at taming: not the best-looking guy among his classmates, maybe, but certainly not the worst. Still, he'd hooked up with only three girls since ninth grade—making out for maybe ten or fifteen minutes with each of them, maybe lifting their shirts—and none had wanted a repeat. That had left him shaken, worried about his skills. "I'm afraid of intimacy," he told me earnestly. "It's a real self-esteem thing."

"Intimacy" was, perhaps, a poor choice of word; it would be more accurate to say that Nate was uncomfortable having drunken sexual interactions with girls he did not know or trust. Yet that was the only form of "intimacy" that genuinely counted among his friends. While girls struggled to find the magic middle ground between "prude" and "slut," boys were pushed to be as sexually active as possible, to knock out their firsts regardless of the circumstances or how they felt about their partners. It was all about checking the right boxes, credentialing oneself. "Guys



need to prove themselves to their guys," Nate said. "So to do that, you're going to be dominating. You're going to maybe push. Because it's like the girl is just there as a means for him to get off and a means for him to brag. That's what you've been taught by your friends."

Before the start of this school year, Nate's "dry spell" seemed to be ending. He was in a relationship with a girl that lasted a full two weeks, until other guys told him she was "quote-unquote 'slutty'"—their word, he assured me, not his. Because although any hookup might be marginally better than no hookup, you only truly got points for hooking up with the right kind of girl. "There's this whole thing that if you hook up with the girl that's below your status it's an L," Nate explained. "A loss. Like a bad move." So he stopped talking to the girl, which was unfortunate: he'd really liked her.

Bored with watching Kyle trash the kitchen, Nate retreated to the couch, letting people swirl around him, occasionally taking what he hoped were artsy photos of the trees and lights outside the living room window. He was starting to relax, to enjoy himself. Gucci Mane, newly out of prison, was streaming on Spotify, boasting about sex and money. *Lil mama wanna suck me and she ain't never met me*. . . . The kids at his school, who were mostly white and affluent, ate that shit up.

Suddenly, Nicole, the party's host and a senior, plopped onto Nate's lap, handing him a shot of vodka. Nate was surprised: usually, if a girl wanted to hook up with you, she'd go through an intermediary, instructing her friends to ask you whether you were up for it. There were texts and Snapchats, and if you said yes, it was on—everyone would be anticipating it, and everyone would expect a postmortem the next day. Nate was impressed, if a little

confused, by Nicole's boldness. She was blond and slim, with amazing eyes and major breasts. Kyle, who was still splashing Sprite all over the kitchen floor, had been *obsessed* with Nicole. Hooking up with her would be a W—a win for Nate. A big one. And sure, he also thought Nicole was hot, though he never actually *liked* her very much and he'd never been especially interested in her before this moment.

He glanced around the room subtly, wanting to make sure, without appearing to care, that everyone who mattered, everyone "relevant," saw what was going down. A couple guys gave him little nods. One winked. Kyle came in from the kitchen and slapped him on the shoulder. Nate feigned nonchalance, like nothing out of the ordinary was happening. Meanwhile, he told me later, "I was just trying not to pop a boner, because that would be weird. But, you know, I'm pretty sure she felt it."

"Hey, Nicole," Kyle said. "Do you want to show Nate your room?"

"Okay," Nicole agreed. Taking Nate's hand, she led him along a hallway and down a flight of stairs, laughing, smiling at her friends. He stopped when they reached her door. "Are you sure you're sober enough to do this?" he asked.

"Mm-hmm," Nicole said, pulling him forward and flipping on the light. Her bed was shoved into a corner next to a window. Outside, a group of kids were smoking weed on a deck. No question: they could definitely see in. Nate panicked. He was already nervous, already afraid that he didn't know what he was doing, already aware that everyone upstairs was going to want to hear the details, but now it seemed like people might actually *watch* them. This was all starting to seem like a terrible mistake, but there was no way to back out. He got through the inevitable, awkward



moments where you actually have to *talk* to your partner, then, finally, they started kissing. In his anxiety, Nate bit Nicole's lip. Hard. "I totally messed up," he said. "And I was thinking, *Oh God! What do I do now?*" But he kept going. He took off her shirt and undid her bra. He took off his own shirt. Then she took off her pants. "And that," he said, "was the first time I ever saw a vagina. I did not know what to do with it." He recalled that his friends had said girls go crazy if you stick your fingers up there and make the "come here" motion, so he tried it, but Nicole just lay there, unmoving. "Guys will call girls like that a 'fish,'" Nate said. "Like a dead fish. So I guess if I talked in those terms, maybe that's what I'd say happened." He didn't ask what might feel better to her, though, because that would be admitting ignorance, and he wasn't about to do that.

After a few more agonizing minutes, Nicole said, "I have to go see what's going on upstairs," got dressed, and left, Nate trailing behind. They rejoined the party and immediately went their separate ways. One of Nate's friends high-fived him and slapped him on the back. Another handed him a bottle of Jack Daniel's and Nate took a long slug. A boy who had hooked up with Nicole at a different party fist-bumped him. "Yo, bro!" he said, "We're Eskimo brothers!"

"And the whole time," Nate said, "I'm thinking, *Holy Fuck! I don't think that went very well. But I guess it was experience. So . . . good for me!*"

Then he heard a senior, a guy Nate considered kind of a friend, loudly ask Nicole, "Why would you hook up with Nate?"

She giggled. "Oh, I was drunk!" she said. "I was so drunk!"

They were calling him an "L."

"I'm sorry, man," one of Nate's friends said, shaking his head. Nate brushed it off. "No, it's okay, don't worry about it." He

went back to the couch and pretended to be drunk to avoid further conversation.

That night, Nate slept over at Kyle's. By then he was completely sober, though Kyle was still stoned. He peppered Nate with questions about Nicole's body and what, precisely, the two of them had done. "I tried not to answer too specifically," Nate said. "I'd just say, 'Yeah, man, it was dope. I feel great. It was totally awesome.'"

They looked through Nicole's Instagram feed and talked about how "great her tits were." "Dude! You hit that!" Kyle said. "Great job!" Kyle's enthusiasm lifted Nate's spirits: he hadn't enjoyed the hookup, but at least it hadn't been a disaster.

Or so he thought. By Monday morning, Nicole had spread the word around school that Nate was "bad" at hooking up: that he'd bit her lip, that he didn't know how to "finger" a girl. That his nails were *ragged*. Maybe she was trying to preserve her own reputation—to avoid being teased for hooking up with an "L." Or maybe she just thought the story was a juicy one. "The stereotype is that guys go into gory detail," Nate said, "but a lot of times it's the other way around. Guys will brag, but they're not so specific. Maybe they'd say, 'I fingered her,' or maybe they wouldn't even say what they did, just that 'we hooked up' and leave it at that. But girls? They'll go into every detail with their friends. What his penis looked like. Every single thing that they did. How it felt. It's like the opposite of what you think."

Nate said he felt "completely emasculated," so shamed that he told his mom he was sick and stayed home from school the next day. "I was basically *crying*," he said. "I was like, '*Shit! I fucked up!*'"

No question, gossip about a guy's poor "performance" could



destroy a reputation. So the guys I talked to actually *were* concerned with female satisfaction in a hookup; they just didn't typically define it through orgasm. Rather, they believed it to be a function of their own endurance and, to a lesser extent, penis size. Andrew, the college freshman in Los Angeles, recalled a guy in high school who "had sex with some girl for the first time and she told everyone he'd ejaculated really quickly. After that, he got the nickname Second Sam. That basically scared the crap out of all the other guys." The public nature of what should be a private act, the invisible audience that was always in the room (apparently holding a stopwatch), could turn boys' early experiences from explorations of sensuality into referendums on masculinity. Guys who'd only had penetrative sex once would anxiously ask me whether they were "premature ejaculators" because they hadn't had the purported stamina of porn actors (whom, they did not realize, maintain their reputation through editing, ED drugs, and penile injections). A college sophomore from Boston explained that he'd developed the habit of glancing at the clock when he started intercourse. "I'd think, *I have to last five minutes, that's a minimum*," he said. "And once I could do that, I'd think, *I need to get to double digits*. I don't even know if it's necessarily about your partner's enjoyment. It's more about getting beyond the point where you would be embarrassed, maintaining your own pride. It's about reaching a place where you feel like she's not going to go tell her friends how disappointing it was. But it also turns sex into a task. One that I enjoy to a certain degree, but one where you're monitoring your performance rather than trying to live in the moment."

Eventually, Nate decided he had to take a stand, if only to make returning to school bearable. "So I texted her a long message and said, 'I'm sorry that you didn't enjoy it, but I would

never do that to you.' Then she felt really bad. She stopped telling people, but we were really awkward around each other after that. It took me until the next semester to recover, until I got a real girlfriend."

### The Morning After the Night Before

"You should write about texting after hookups," Ellie said. "There's norms, but no one really knows what they are."

It was ten o'clock on the morning after the night before, and a group of freshmen in various stages of postparty foggiess had regrouped in Iris's dorm room. Iris, dressed in a business suit and bunny slippers, was rushing around, getting ready to leave for a debate tournament. As she dabbed on makeup, she debriefed her friends about a guy she'd made out with at the previous night's party, whom she sort of liked. "He said I should come by his frat some time," she said. "So—maybe..."

Ellie, the girl who'd gone on about Judith Butler, watched groggily from bed, still in her pj's, along with another friend, LeeAnn, who clutched a thermal coffee mug. Caleb, who lived down the hall, seemed the most chipper of the bunch. He hadn't gone out the previous night because, he said, he'd been drinking too much lately and thought he should cut back. A few weeks earlier, he'd visited a friend who was in a fraternity at a nearby state university; one night of that was enough liquor for a long time. "I saw what bro culture really is," he said. "I mean, individually, they weren't douche-y people; they're all really friendly and nice and smart. But after a couple of hours of playing video games you realize that five guys have literally gone through five handles of vodka and it becomes like night and



day. I actually don't remember much, but I know we were walking to the party, having a great time together, then the second we got in the door they all dispersed to find a chick to talk to, and that was it. I didn't see any of them again for two hours. It was so clear-cut: you get there, you're smashed, you try to hook up, and then you try to remember it in the morning." Perhaps, as Caleb did, you also wake up encrusted with your own vomit.

The sex in those hookups can't be too good, I commented. They all nodded in agreement.

"Sometimes," LeeAnn mused, "I've gone through with hookup sex because I feel—'obligated' is a strong word, but it's kind of *expected*. I feel like the other person would be bummed out if I didn't."

"There would be something lacking," Ellie agreed.

"Just the *expectation* that they were going to get laid," LeeAnn added.

I turned to Caleb and asked whether he was aware that girls sometimes hook up out of duty rather than desire.

"That is really surprising," he said. "I did not know that. I thought if you're going out and getting drunk and trying to hook up with somebody, you put yourself in that situation so you can get your own pleasure out of it."

"I do feel like guys are oblivious to what goes on for girls in hookups, though," he added. "As a guy, the way you think about a hookup is very binary—either you overthink it a ton because you care, or you dissociate yourself from it entirely and do it to, like, get praise from your friends or something. I want to believe I'm self-reflective, but a lot of time, yeah, it's either overthinking or not thinking about it at all."

Which brought us back to the subject of that all-important post-hookup text. According to sociologist Lisa Wade's research,

partners are expected to be *less* friendly after a hookup than they were before, at least for a while, as the last step toward affirming that requisite meaninglessness. Girls used to tell me that the first person who admitted to "catching feelings"—a phrase that makes affection sound like an STD—"loses." But that creates a predicament for the over half of both men and women who say they'd like their hookups to turn into something more. "You meet someone for the first time, hang out with them the whole night, and potentially end up hooking up with them," said one of a group of fraternity brothers I talked to at a Midwestern college. "Then the next day you're walking down the street and it's like . . ." He looked up as if spotting someone he knew, then quickly averted his gaze. "There's *no* eye contact. It's very much like, 'I'm not saying hi. We're just going to move past each other.' Like, 'We're not actually *friends*. It was just this thing that happened at a party.' I hate it."

I asked him, in that case, what kept him from breaking protocol. "There's this sense of—I don't know, maybe weakness? You're trying to play it cool. Like"—he switched to the laconic "bro" voice I'd heard so often—"Oh yeah, it's cool. Whatever." I mean, I don't know if she was into it or if she's trying to move on; she doesn't know if I'm into it or if I'm trying to move on. And because of that question mark, you don't want to make yourself vulnerable and get shut down for it and then be like, 'Oh, you idiot. It was a party! You should've realized it was a one-time thing!' So you just play it safe and don't say anything."

"Even if that means you miss the opportunity for something more?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. "Even if it means you miss the opportunity for something more."

Back in California, Caleb echoed those sentiments. "I hate



texting girls. It's more anxiety-provoking than the actual hookup. There's this whole game you play with the timing. How long do you wait to send the first text? How long do you wait to reply?" It's all fraught with layers of meaning, with projecting the right balance between casual and clingy. "And after you get over the timing, you have to worry about the actual content," he continued. "What you say, yeah, but also using 'you' versus 'u' or purposely misspelling a word, like 'wanna' instead of 'want to.' And then, you're Snapping back and forth with someone and they suddenly take twenty minutes to respond—"

"Then you have to take twenty-five," Ellie interrupted.

"Exactly," Caleb said. "And it's like, 'I *know* you have your phone right there! We all always have our phones on us. It's not like you didn't see the Snapchat.' So then you're left staring at it waiting for them to reply."

"Plus, you don't know what anything means," Ellie added.

"There's no inflection. Like, if someone texts you, 'Thanks for a great night.' That could mean: 'I want it to happen again,' or it could be closing it off. You just don't know."

"What about when a guy slides into your DMs on Instagram?" said LeeAnn.

"That's totally different than a text," Caleb said. "A DM is more like you *know* why you're talking. You're going to hook up. DMs are the most casual. Anyone can DM you. If you're really interested in a girl, you'll text. *Maybe* you'll Snap."

Nearly every interview I've ever conducted on hookup culture, like this one, quickly devolved into a discussion of its drawbacks. Why, I asked the group, do you continue to participate?

"Well, it is a lot easier," Ellie said. "And it can be fun."

"And it's still sex," Caleb added. "Even bad sex is still sex."

## The Feminist Fuckboy

"I do believe, though, that you can have a casual sexual lifestyle and also be respectful and loving." Wyatt was entering his junior year at a small liberal arts college on the East Coast that, despite having no Greek life, was known for its entrenched hookup scene. In part, that was due to a dearth of men on what was formerly an all-women's campus: competition for male attention was fierce. Added to that, Wyatt was a rare heterosexual male dance major and handsome—wavy chestnut hair, sculpted features, a well-muscled body that he was only too happy to flaunt at parties, removing his shirt at the least provocation. He pretty much had his pick of partners on campus, and over the past year, he had taken full advantage of that. "At my school, they call it 'Golden Dick Syndrome,'" he said. "There is this inherent godliness that straight men tend to feel here, where it's just like, 'Everybody wants me.' It's just the way it is. Instead of one girl across the party that you know is interested in you, imagine there are *six*. It can actually feel kind of weird."

Wyatt had not been popular when he was younger. As he said, "Most people who go to colleges like mine weren't exactly the kings of their high schools, you know?" He was more the guy who stayed home on Saturday nights playing *Grand Theft Auto* and listening to hip-hop. "I'm a big Kanye defender," he said. "For how hypermasculine he is, he actually strips it down more than most big stars. He talks about what a jerk he is and how he's a sex addict and has depression and anxiety. In the end, I think he's a lot more up-front than most men."

For much of his freshman year, Wyatt had a girlfriend—his parents had just separated, which had been a huge shock, and he



clung to the security and emotional support of a relationship—but since that ended he described himself as being “on the prowl.” Every weekend he would have sex with a different girl (in one-offs, he said, he “nearly always” wore condoms). As soon as it was over, he’d be back on Tinder or stalking someone on Instagram, thinking about who to pursue next. “The number of women I’ve slept with is unbelievable,” he said. “I can’t even begin to count them. I don’t dare.” Sex made him feel good: good about himself, good in general. It eased anxiety, numbed depression, distracted him from and substituted for any true feeling. And, of course, it was fun. “I like that hookups are not this huge emotional thing,” he said. “We can just be primal.” But he was starting to worry that he might be investing too much of his self-worth in sexual conquest. “My actual attraction to the person almost doesn’t matter,” he told me. “If she is assertive enough, there’s a very good chance I’ll just say yes.”

I’d met Wyatt through one of his former high school teachers, who’d told me that he led workshops on consent for men on his campus. That was true, he said, although he found other guys were not always so keen on the message. “They’ll say, ‘It’s just not how it’s supposed to be.’ Or they offer up all these very specific circumstances like, ‘Let’s say this girl starts grinding on me and kissing me. Do I still have to ask her?’ They pick away at it. So I find myself explaining, ‘Why would you take the risk?’ Just deal with the fact that it’s awkward and maybe you don’t think it’s sexy. I’d rather have something not be sexy than be accused of rape.”

Personally, Wyatt saw establishing consent as erotic, part of the buildup and play of sex. His MO was pretty straightforward: after hanging out and talking to a girl for a while—maybe drinking at a party, though sometimes sober—he’d make his “big move.” “I’ll say, ‘Hey, I think you’re really pretty. Can I kiss you?’

It’s direct, and I don’t want to do that thing where I lean in and get rejected like in the movies. And as things progress, I ask, ‘Do you think that you’re sober enough? Do you want some water?’ Stuff like that. Things that I would want someone to do with me.”

He was scrupulous about checking in at every escalating stage of an encounter, too, but similar to the boys he counseled, his female partners haven’t always reacted well. “Some of them don’t like it,” he admitted, “but they don’t stick around long. There was one girl this year who I was very attracted to. Very excited to be hooking up with her. I asked, ‘Can I kiss you?’ and she started laughing. She thought it was ‘cute,’ but she was also like, ‘What?’ Then, I asked, ‘Can I take your shirt off?’ And she was like, ‘You don’t have to ask!’ That just makes me mad because it is exactly the quagmire I want to avoid.”

For every girl who’s seemed put off, though, more have been appreciative. “I’ll just put it out there,” he said, “affirmative consent is really hot. It’s exciting to have a girl saying, ‘Yes! I want you to do this.’ ‘Yes! I want you to do that.’ To feel she’s really into it. It’s a pretty awesome thing for both of you to have that sort of connection.”

Wyatt said he’s also clear with his partners that he’s not looking for anything *more* than sex, even if he wants to see them again. “I’ll say, ‘It’s going to be in a very casual capacity, and if you can’t do that, then we can’t do this.’” When, on occasion, he’s sensed someone starting to “catch feelings”—wanting to know more about him, asking questions, maybe wanting to do something together outside of the bedroom—he’s “floated away,” growing “flaky” and “distant.” “Because I’m not there for that,” he explained, “and I’m not going to be there for that.”

From my interviews with girls, I knew that some of them would be fine with such an arrangement: they, too, were only looking



for a wild night and a warm body. But others felt that hookup culture had trapped them into a game of emotional chicken: they had to feign a disinterest they didn't necessarily feel in order to avoid appearing "clingy" or desperate for a boyfriend.

So I asked Wyatt: Do you think the girls that you were with when you got "flaky" are the same ones who would tell me that all guys are "dicks?"

He laughed uncomfortably. "Gosh! I mean, I hope not, but... yeah." He winced. "Yeah, that could be true. I mean..." He let out a sigh. "Yeah. That could be true. Who knows what girls really think when you tell them you don't want to be with them, you know? Maybe they do tell their friends that all guys are the same. That if you try to move forward emotionally, guys immediately back off... because"—he winced again—"I've done all that. I have. But in my defense, I always try to ask, 'Are you sure you're okay with the fact that I don't go to lunch with you?'"

What would happen, though, I asked, if when a guy said that, the girl responded that she *did* want to go to lunch? What if she said that the truth was, she was looking for a loving relationship? "Well, at my school that would be lethal for her social life."

So, I pressed, what choice does she really have, then? If you're having sex with girls you're not especially attracted to or interested in and your supposed righteous honesty about not wanting a relationship potentially forces them to either deny their own feelings or sacrifice their sex lives, how, exactly, are those hookups "loving and respectful?"

Wyatt nodded emphatically. "That's what I'm trying to say! I haven't always been true to my own philosophy. It's been sort of—masturbatory on my part."

That's why, he continued, he, too, was starting to sour on hookup culture. Over the summer, Wyatt had been hanging out

a lot with an old high school friend in the Bay Area, going to bars and parties. At the end of every evening, he would invariably have sex with one of the guy's female friends—a different one every time. Finally, after Wyatt indulged in a drunken threesome with two girls, the other boy confronted him: "I go out with you to have a good time together, but it feels like you've made a checklist of all my friends so you can go through it and fuck them and then discard them." That wasn't far from the truth, and it stung. "I realized I was becoming, like, a feminist fuckboy," Wyatt said. "The kind of guy who says all the right things, but still treats women badly. And that feels horrible..." Wyatt broke off, pausing for a long time. "No," he continued quietly. "That's a lie. In the beginning it felt amazing, but eventually not, because there is no investment, because the sex doesn't mean shit to me. Because the other person doesn't mean shit to me. And, well, I'm not going to lie. I've liked it. I thought I was okay with it. But I'm starting not to be okay with it. Because..." He paused again. "Because there's more to me than that."

As a journalist, I don't prescribe the circumstance in which young people ought to have sex: my job is only to describe the context and explore its impact so they can make educated choices, maybe disrupt the conventional script. For girls, I concluded that a hookup was likely to give them a feeling of being wanted or desired for an evening, an adrenaline rush, a war story to share with friends. It was less likely to result in good sex or help them develop the tools they would need for either good sex or emotional intimacy. After hearing from dozens of boys, I would say the same to them, with the additional qualifier that hookup culture presumes that they, unlike girls, lack even a basic capacity for love, that they neither can nor should acknowledge emotional vulnerability—not in others, not in themselves. Other



cultures give boys more credit than that. In comparing Dutch and American families' attitudes toward teen sexuality, for instance, sociologist Amy Schalet found that parents in the Netherlands considered boys to be both capable and desirous of emotional connection; US parents, by contrast, dismissed young men as "driven by hormones" and only interested in sex. Perhaps not surprisingly, although boys in both countries overwhelmingly said they wanted to combine love with lust, only the Dutch saw that as normal: American boys each thought his perspective was a personal quirk, unusual among his peers. Yet, a large-scale survey of high school students found our boys were as emotionally invested in their relationships as girls; perhaps having had less practice or support in sustaining intimacy, though, they were less confident in navigating them.

The boys I met felt at least as isolated in their struggles over love as they were about sex and, if anything, were more hungry to discuss it. There was the twenty-year-old at a Big Ten university who had been dating the same girl for three years. His fraternity brothers as well as his father were pushing him to cut her loose so he could take advantage of the school's infamous party scene. "My dad says, 'I'm not paying fifty grand a year for you not to get laid,'" he told me. "Hearing that from him—it doesn't make me second-guess what I'm doing exactly, but it hurts that he's not fully behind me."

Or another guy, a college sophomore in Chicago who told me he hadn't much enjoyed the three hookups he'd engaged in (and had ghosted all three partners afterward) but didn't know how else to show his interest in a girl. "The thing is," he said, "I could never ask a random girl on a date. That would just be weird."

So, I said, it would be more appropriate to get drunk, make

out with someone you don't really know on the dance floor and maybe have intercourse with her than to, say, ask someone you like from one of your classes to go to a movie?

"Yeah," he said sheepishly.

"Doesn't *that* seem 'weird'?" I asked.

"Absolutely," he agreed. "I think that all the time."

Or a college junior in Oregon who told me, "I've had two one-night stands in college, and both of them have left me feeling empty and depressed. I have no idea what I gained from those experiences other than being like, 'Yeah, I had sex with someone.' There were no feelings of discovery or pleasure or intimate connection, which are really the things that I value. I mean, what is this dance we're doing right now if all we take away is a number?"

Then there was the college sophomore in Los Angeles, one of the more sexually active young men I met, who fell silent when I asked about the most intimate act he'd ever engaged in, finally saying, almost reverently, "Holding hands."

WHEN I TALKED to Wyatt again, a year later, he had fallen in love with a girl he'd met at a semester-long dance intensive. "She's sociable, bubbly, outgoing," he enthused. "She's very passionate, just like I am. We both love to talk; there's no room for the shallow stuff. We're very much a match."

"So," I asked, "do you go out to lunch?"

He laughed. They do, he said. And to dinner. And on dates. "We have a very healthy sex life, too," he added, "but the difference is, there's an investment beyond sex. She's the only person I've wanted to cuddle with or take a nap with or spend the night



with. We both wanted that. We both approached it that way from the beginning. If we were going to do these things sexually, they were going to be earned through intimacy and it was going to matter."

Wyatt said that by the time he met his girlfriend, he'd become fully disillusioned with the "businesslike" nature of hookups; he was tired of treating his partners like objects, tired of feeling like one himself. "Yeah, I was the boy toy," he said. "But having sex with someone you love, with this person who's happy that it's *me*, Wyatt, her boyfriend, not just some body? That's amazing. That's something else."

I was unexpectedly moved by boys who spoke of love, in part because of the stark difference in their description of their female partners. Rather than speaking of them as a collection of body parts (Wyatt never even mentioned his girlfriend's appearance), they would reference a girl's character, intellect, personality, generosity, humor, strength, talent. They spoke with admiration and respect for girls' accomplishments or insight—they veritably glowed. They tended to be more conscious of their partners' sexual pleasure, but they also expressed more satisfaction with their own experience: they felt more relaxed, more trusting, more free. Again, that's partly due to the learning curve involved in being with a new person, but it's also because young people infuse relationship sex with the care and kindness they avoid in a hookup.

"Looking back," Wyatt said, "I *did* have Golden Dick Syndrome. And yeah, I led the consent workshops for guys, but I've realized that consent is the *bare minimum* that should be expected when you're with someone. People think once they've been granted consent for sex that all bets are off in terms of what you do to someone emotionally, how you treat them. And that's not true."

Nate, too, fell in love shortly after his ill-fated junior year hookup. His girlfriend, who was a year older, was flirting with him in school one day and suggested, "Hey, we should hang out sometime." He was reluctant at first, afraid of being mocked again, but then he told himself, *Nate, you cannot hide from this your whole life*, and asked her out. "She is just amazing," he told me, grinning. "She's so kindhearted. So sweet. We just totally like to be together." And physically? "The first time we hooked up, we had oral sex," he said. "Both ways. She thought it was funny that I didn't know what I was doing, because she did. She'd gone out with an older guy for two years. But she smiled at me the whole time and was genuinely laughing and having fun. I was like, 'You're enjoying this?' It was shocking to me. But she let me know what she wanted, and I let her know what I wanted, and it was all very healthy."

Even a year later, after she'd graduated and gone to college, breaking Nate's heart, he didn't regret the relationship. "I'm learning what love really is," he told me. "And I've realized that I'm so unattracted to the idea of making sex just good for me as a guy so I can brag about it to my friends. That seems so stupid if sex is about being intimate and enjoying a shared experience with someone. And, honestly, I don't think a lot of the guys really even have fun doing it, either."

I am neither a romantic nor a traditionalist, nor am I opposed to uncommitted sex, though I don't consider "uncommitted" license to be unkind. Relationships are not inherently healthy, particularly given how little guidance young people receive about intimacy: romantic partners can be controlling, coercive, even violent—nearly 1.5 million high school students nationwide experience physical abuse from a dating partner each year (and only a third of them tell anyone about it). Breakups can be devastating,



especially for teenagers, and no one likes that pain. Still, falling in love, experiencing intimacy, vulnerability, even heartbreak are important steps in adolescent development and crucial practice for successful adult relationships. Hookup culture short-circuits all of that. Nor, in the end, does it deliver on its promise of sex that is liberated, joyous, and free of consequence. Hot sex with a cold heart may seem an expedient choice—all the fun with none of the emotional exposure—but for guys, it can create yet another block to authentic connection. If they don't learn the skills to support and sustain intimacy, they may end up unprepared for mature romantic relationships. Yet, ironically, they're more dependent than girls on those relationships for emotional support. As a result, young men become more distraught when things get rocky, which makes them even more leery of risking their hearts again, perpetuating a cycle of disconnection.

That said, according to sociologist Lisa Wade, one of the lessons both guys and girls often do take from hookup culture is a knowledge of what they don't want, which, while sometimes hard-won, is not without value. As Wyatt said, "I think I had to go through all that. Not to say that I'm glad, but I'm thankful for those experiences. The understanding I have now came from fucking up, from giving in to my impulses."

"Some people can participate in that culture and it's fine," he added, "but it was not great for me. It was not what I wanted to hang my hat on. I want to think there is more to me than that. Sturdier things. Family. A girlfriend I love. Doing something meaningful. These are the things I can hang onto more than how many girls I fucked."

Wyatt and I were catching up via Skype, about to wrap up, when I happened to get a text from Nate. I hadn't heard from him in months; by now he was in the spring of his senior year of

high school and was out touring the colleges where he'd been accepted before making a final choice. He was texting from a school in Southern California.

*WTF is up with hookup culture?* he wrote. *It's like an orgy here—is that the way to live? Should I be investing in that or in forming meaningful connections with women? Maybe I should just go to BONETOWN and then try to be an emotionally available human being afterward? Or can I skip that step?*

Rather than responding directly, I read the text to Wyatt and asked for his advice.

"I would say . . ." He thought for a long moment. "Don't sell yourself out to be a part of that. The hookup scene has a loud voice in college. But I don't believe anymore that it's all college has to be. I have plenty of friends who don't live that kind of life—I'm included—and they're so much happier for it. So, if you have that gut instinct that it's not for you, man, don't do it. Don't do it just to fit in. That's what I did. And it kills you."

I typed quickly as Wyatt spoke and sent off the result to Nate. Immediately, three dots indicating he was replying popped up on my screen. Here is what he wrote:

*THANK YOU. Really. Thank you. Exactly what I needed to hear. This is where my heart is.*

And then he added a heart emoji.

I smiled and tapped back a thumbs-up. I hoped that exchange would help him move forward with confidence in who he truly was—an intense, tender, loving young man—rather than denying or devaluing those qualities in order to have some contrived version of "the college experience." I thought about all the other Nates out there. So few teenagers, especially boys, have an adult with whom to talk through their confusion about sex and love, who can help them with basic decision-making.



I turned my attention back to Wyatt, who seemed to have read my mind. "My heart breaks for those young guys who are questioning the hookup culture, who are asking, 'What should I do?'" he said. "It's trial by fire. You've really got to consider how you'll look back on it later. If it's 'That was awesome! I was experimenting!' well, great. But if long-term, it's going to haunt you the way it haunts me now . . . think twice."

## CHAPTER 4

## Get Used to It

*Gay, Trans, and Queer Guys*

Zane often referred to the "gentlemen" he'd hooked up with. As in "the wealthy Republican gentleman in the penthouse apartment," whom he met on Grindr, the swipe app for men seeking other men. The word was a nod to his southern upbringing, a soupçon of Blanche DuBois to warm the chilly northern city where he was now a college sophomore. Zane grew up in Tennessee, in a town of eighteen thousand people, nearly all of whom are conservative Christian Republicans. His dad, a factory worker, and his mom, a secretary, taped a portrait of George W. Bush to the family refrigerator when Zane was a child. The other boys in his high school favored camo gear (before it was trendy) and chewed tobacco; they worshipped Jesus on Sunday mornings and football on Monday nights. At his Baptist Sunday school, Zane learned how to "pray away the gay," although at the time, he didn't think that applied to him. Sure, he was more "effeminate" than other boys: his favorite color in kindergarten was