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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## Sex and the Teenage Girl

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THE movie “Juno” is a fairy tale about a pregnant teenager who decides to have her baby, place it for adoption and then get on with her life. For the most part, the tone of the movie is comedic and jolly, but there is a moment when Juno tells her father about her condition, and he shakes his head in disappointment and says, “I thought you were the kind of girl who knew when to say when.”

Female viewers flinch when he says it, because his words lay bare the bitterly unfair truth of sexuality: female desire can bring with it a form of punishment no man can begin to imagine, and so it is one appetite women and girls must always regard with caution. Because Juno let her guard down and had a single sexual experience with a sweet, well-intentioned boy, she alone is left with this ordeal of sorrow and public shame.

In the movie, the moment passes. Juno finds a yuppie couple eager for a baby, and when the woman tries to entice her with the promise of an open adoption, the girl shakes her head adamantly: “Can’t we just kick it old school? I could just put the baby in a basket and send it your way. You know, like Moses in the reeds.”

It’s a hilarious moment, and the sentiment turns out to be genuine. The final scene of the movie shows Juno and her boyfriend returned to their carefree adolescence, the baby —safely in the hands of his rapturous and responsible new mother —all but forgotten. Because I’m old enough now that teenage movie characters evoke a primarily maternal response in me (my question during the film wasn’t “What would I do in that situation?” but “What would I do if my daughter were in that situation?”), the last scene brought tears to my eyes. To see a young daughter, faced with the terrible fact of a pregnancy, unscathed by it and completely her old self again was magical.

And that’s why “Juno” is a fairy tale. As any woman who has ever chosen (or been forced) to kick it old school can tell you, surrendering a baby whom you will never know comes with a steep and lifelong cost. Nor is an abortion psychologically or physically simple. It is an invasive and frightening procedure, and for some adolescent girls it constitutes part of their first gynecological exam. I know grown women who’ve wept bitterly after abortions, no matter how sound their decisions were. How much harder are these procedures for girls, whose moral and emotional universe is just taking shape?

Even the much-discussed pregnancy of 16-year-old Jamie Lynn Spears reveals the rudely unfair toll that a few minutes of pleasure can exact on a girl. The very fact that the gossip magazines are still debating the identity of the father proves again that the burden of sex is the woman’s to bear. He has a chance to maintain his privacy, but if she becomes pregnant by mistake, soon all the world will know.

Pregnancy robs a teenager of her girlhood. This stark fact is one reason girls used to be so carefully guarded and protected—in a system that at once limited their horizons and safeguarded them from devastating consequences. The feminist historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg has written that “however prudish and ‘uptight’ the Victorians were, our ancestors had a deep commitment to girls.”

We, too, have a deep commitment to girls, and ours centers not on protecting their chastity, but on supporting their ability to compete with boys, to be free—perhaps for the first time in history—from the restraints that kept women from achieving on the same level. Now we have to ask ourselves this question: Does the full enfranchisement of girls depend on their being sexually liberated? And if it does, can we somehow change or diminish among the very young the trauma of pregnancy, the occasional result of even safe sex?

Biology is destiny, and the brutally unfair outcome that adolescent sexuality can produce will never change. Twenty years ago, I taught high school in a town near New Orleans. There was a girls’ bathroom next to my classroom, which was more convenient for me than the faculty one on the other side of campus. In the last stall, carved deeply into the metal box reserved for used sanitary napkins, was the single word “Please.”

Whoever had written it had taken a long time; the word was etched so deeply into the metal that she must have worked on it over several days, hiding in there on hall passes or study breaks, desperate. I never knew who wrote it, or when, but I always knew exactly what that anonymous girl meant. When I looked out over the girls moving through the hallways between classes, I wondered if she was among them, and I hoped that her prayer had been answered.

*Caitlin Flanagan, the author of “To Hell With All That,” is working on a book about the emotional lives of pubescent girls.*

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