

VIRGIN

THE FEMINIST

The sexual woman: liberated, empowered.

The chaste woman: timid, repressed.

Says who? Writer Amanda McCracken, a

36-year-old virgin, claims her right to say 'No' >

Photography **Kristin Vicari**



Last month, a colleague confessed that she had lost her virginity, aged 15, during a school lunch break, just two weeks after her first kiss. She can't remember details, but does recall the burning desire to know what it was like. 'Aren't you curious?' she asked. Interesting question. I've run mountainous trail marathons at an elevation of 10,000ft just to see what that would be like, but no - while I may be a 36-year-old virgin, I'm not especially curious. Curiosity is all relative: I may be curious to know what I've got for my birthday, but I don't want to unwrap my presents early.

Still, when conversations turn to sex, it's not like I make my excuses and leave. I ask questions and share my own sexual experiences (because I have had them, they just haven't involved intercourse). My friends who are married with children have lives that don't revolve around their bedroom activities, so chat rarely veers in that direction. Single friends do sometimes find it awkward, though, assuming I expect them to follow the same abstinence 'diet', and that I'm silently judging them if they don't. I can tell what some are thinking: 'Why don't you want what I'm having?' Women are uncomfortable when others aren't maintaining an even playing field, whether it's with sex or food.

Of course, the immediate assumption is that my decision is a religious one. Perhaps it's less threatening that way. People seem to respond better to those who have tried something and then abstained, than to those who have never tried. It's easier to be a reformed 'slut' than a virgin waiting for the right relationship. Actually, I was brought up Christian; taught to believe that my body was to be respected and valued. I was also brought up a feminist - my parents taught me to stand up for and protect myself, to be self-confident, independent, assertive and self-reliant. I was told I could do anything I wanted. And at that point, I wanted to be a virgin. As a teenager, this was no hardship - the thought of some guy thrusting his penis inside me didn't appeal much then. But as the idea of sex became more appealing, I began to explore it more. I still didn't crave it, though. I messed around with men - I've come close to having sex more often than many of my single friends have actually *had* sex - but whoever I'm naked with knows my boundaries and rarely do I have to reinforce them. Marriage is not my prerequisite for sex, but I want to love and be committed to the man with whom I first have it.



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That's not to say that I think love and sex are necessarily intertwined; I might still be a virgin, but I have said 'I love you' out loud. He was in the army, and we were introduced by a mutual acquaintance over email while he was abroad. I wrote to him for months before flying over to Paris for our first meeting. I was 26, and our first kiss was on the Pont des Arts, overlooking a glittering Eiffel Tower. We dated for three years after that, but we always lived in different states or countries, which may have made the sex issue slightly easier. Our rendezvous were endlessly romantic - in an Aspen chalet, a boutique French hotel, a hacienda in Santa Fe, a New York City B&B. After 11 months together, and one month before his second deployment to Kuwait, in the heat of the moment I told him that I was ready to have sex. He said no. Perhaps it was due to his imminent departure. Perhaps it was because he didn't want to. Or maybe it was because he didn't think I really wanted to. Maybe I didn't.

But do I want to now? Certainly, in my mid-30s, it's harder and harder to hold back. I've found myself smelling the lingering sweat of a man on my skin, aching physically to have him near once more. I've lived out some of my own fantasies (even if they haven't involved actual intercourse), with kinky foreplay and blindfolds. The London Eye looked on as I found myself lip-locked with a handsome journalist on the Thames. I flew to Chicago to be painted nude by a former boyfriend, an artist. I've happily taken on a dominatrix role and men have enjoyed it. I've felt empowered in situations where I've done what I felt comfortable doing, without complying with a man's demands - even when that man is an Ironman world champion. When I answered his hotel-room booty call and he told me to 'finish the job', I suggested that, considering his world title, he ought to be able to finish it himself. And then I walked out. I'm not languishing in my ivory tower waiting to let my hair down for the prince.

Fifty years ago, there would have been nothing unusual about my situation. But being a virgin at my age is now so odd that, when I wrote about it last year for the *The New York Times*, I was the focus of national attention -

much of it uncomfortable and unwelcome. One male reader emailed to say that 'saving my virginity' was a 'selfish act'. He had some advice too (lucky me!): 'You have to learn how to give more than you receive every once in a while... Part of life is getting used.' My first reaction was guilt: I hadn't intended to hurt any man's feelings. Then I realised that I don't owe anyone anything - not men desiring sex, nor the feminists who think 'empowered' equals 'sexually uninhibited', and who believe that I am neither.

For those women, there is no acknowledgment of the flipside of my self-enforced chastity: if I have the ability to choose *not* to have sex, isn't that equally liberating? There are millions of women in this world who don't have a say in when and with whom they are intimate, but I am lucky enough to be completely in control. In an interview, porn-star-turned-actress Sasha Grey once said: 'If you look at me and you think: "Here's a woman who's intelligent, cognisant and making her own choices," and you still tell me that what I'm doing is wrong, screw you, because that should end the debate.' What do a porn star and a 36-year-old virgin have in common? The freedom to choose.

A few men have generously offered to 'help' me get over the hump, as if lack of opportunity has been my main issue. I've even had men tell me that I should give them a call when I 'finally decide to do it' and another, who I dated for three months, tell me that for my birthday I should have sex with him. It didn't feel like much of a present to me, and we parted ways a month later with his text: 'You are too strong and independent a woman. It's just too much for me.' In ending it with another man I dated but who refused to commit, I asked whether having sex might have made a difference. His response: 'I thought about that. But I knew sleeping with you wouldn't be fair because we were in different places.' This is, in fact, a bit of a theme. I recently went on my fourth date with a guy who informed me that he didn't want to become sucked into the 'gravity' of the situation. His use of the word 'gravity' felt ridiculous, especially since all of our clothes were off by the end of the third date. But he didn't want to get properly involved if sex wasn't a certainty: 'I don't want to get hooked on you and then find out I'm not the guy you want to do it with.'

I will admit that I'm a procrastinator, and I do worry that this waiting will essentially result in little more than old eggs, a decreased libido and lingering regrets. Will all the good men be taken? Or, if I find one, will I be too set in



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my ways, too independent to make it work? And yet, my gut tells me that someone, somewhere out there will value my decision and my body, because I value them. Does making it such a big deal put a suffocating pressure on fledgling relationships? Well, I've definitely wondered if I need to have sex with someone before I can find love and commitment.

When I was asked on to the US current affairs programme *Katie*, hosted by Katie Couric, as a guest in a segment entitled *The Virginity Movement*, even Katie (who presumed, like many, that I wanted her advice) told me that I should just go ahead and have sex. She didn't, by the way, offer the same advice to the 37-year-old man on the same show - make of that what you will. She said I had 'fairy-tale princess syndrome', that I was waiting for a knight in shining armour to sweep me off my feet. But what's so wrong with waiting for the right knight? Contrary to what many assume of my expectations, I don't imagine rose petals and fireworks - or actually, even an orgasm - when I first have sex. And yes, I have orgasmed before; I am perfectly aware of my own desires and how to fulfil them.

Yet I'm still made to feel like I'm somehow betraying the sisterhood. Just as my femininity isn't defined by my choice to have children or not, neither is it defined by whether I've had a penis inside me. In former *Cosmo* editor Helen Gurley Brown's 1962 book *Sex And The Single Girl*, she says of the virgin: 'Her state of purity becomes almost an embarrassing cross to bear... she is no longer a virgin by freedom of choice but is instead hopelessly trapped by her own inhibitions.' The book is over 50 years old and yet feminists still sing the same tune today. But my identity is dependent on neither marriage nor sex - I like to think of it as a disco ball: hundreds of mirrors reflecting the characteristics of those that I admire and respect. I'm a teacher, an athlete, a coach, a massage therapist, a gardener, a friend, a sister and a daughter. I have swum from Alcatraz to the San Francisco shore, jumped off a three-storey-high cliff into the sea, completed seven marathons and 30 triathlons. And yet, for many, it is my virginity that solely defines my identity.

I want to be with someone who doesn't base his decision to be with me on whether I'd a dead cert in bed, someone who thinks I'm worth waiting for and loves me before he knows what it's like to have sex with me. Someone willing to invest long enough to see if we're relationship material. The things underpinning my decision to wait have evolved since I was a chaste teenager, but they are still rooted in my firm belief in self-worth, feminist principles - and the freedom to make my own choices. ●