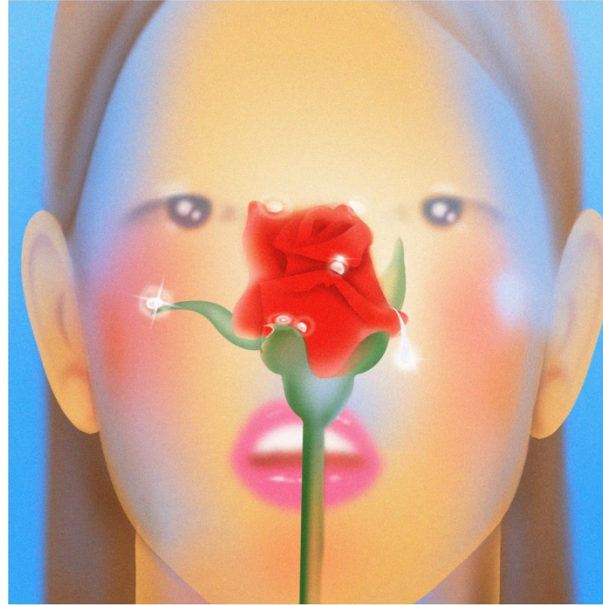


The Sexiest Year of My Life Involved Zero Sex

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Ohni Lisle

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By Melissa Febos
Ms. Febos is the author of a forthcoming memoir, "The Dry Season."

A friend confided to me recently that she was burned out on dating. Cruising the apps in midlife felt humiliating, and she repeatedly confronted the same obstacles in her relationships.

I told her I had faced similar challenges, until I spent a year intentionally celibate. She pointed out that a year was a long time to live without intimacy. I assured her that abstaining from sex for a year was not only the best thing I ever did for my future romantic prospects, it was also the most erotic year of my life.

Let me explain. Mostly, I mean erotic in the capacious sense: the sensual, embodied, vital, empowered aspects of beingness, what the writer Audre Lorde referred to as “an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered.” Hildegard of Bingen, the sainted German nun and mystic polymath born in 1098, called it *viriditas*: the fecund, wet, greening power of life. But, I also do mean the explicitly physical and the sexual.

When I was in my mid-30s, a relationship in which I had completely lost myself came to a terrible end. In the merciful quiet that followed, I realized that I had been in nonstop romantic partnerships since my midteens. Over the years, friends had suggested I take some time alone, but even when I tried, my sights always locked onto someone new.

This time, I decided to take the endeavor more seriously. I would spend three months abstinent. Did my friends laugh at me? Yes, of course. I knew 90 days without sex was ridiculous to some but also that for me it was a radical decision. Quickly, I realized that my problem — that is, my preoccupation — was less sexual in nature than romantic. Even with sex and dating off the table, I had plenty left to occupy me in the realm of flirting and fantasizing.

I decided to extend my celibacy for another three months and draw some strict boundaries: no romantic activity at all. No charged friendships, no scanning the party or the street or the waiting room for the people I found attractive.

The air quality in my life changed, as if I'd opened a window. I could breathe easier. My pulse slowed. I noticed more, from the sensations of my own body to the changing light as days progressed. I hadn't known how much energy and attention it took to be in love or looking for it.

After long consideration, I decided that my celibacy could permit masturbation. Indulging in too much of it had never been my problem. I did not compulsively seek my own physical pleasure, but more so the satisfactions of pleasing others. Even when I enjoyed it, sex had usually included some element of performance that distanced me from my own body. In both casual and long-term relationships, I often had sex when I didn't want to. By contrast, my experience of self-pleasure had always been and remained utterly unselfconscious, never reluctant. It felt like a remedy to all the ambivalent entanglements of my past.

As the weeks passed, every aspect of my life sharpened. The delights of sleeping and waking alone, not speaking to another soul until I chose. In the absence of romantic pursuit, I came to appreciate the true love of my friendships. I had many profound and yearslong connections with other women that had evolved more complexly than those with any lover. We had weathered conflicts and seen one another through enormous changes. These relationships were characterized by a deep tenderness and mutual acceptance that I had sometimes taken for granted. Not anymore.

When I was caught in my ceaseless patterns of attachment, I could not see how it governed every aspect of my life. There were a myriad of micro-adjustments I made to accommodate the desires (sometimes only imagined!) of my partners. Little facts about myself or my days that I elided. Creative or social time that I cut short because I worried they'd feel neglected. Foods that I ate or did not according to my partners' preferences. Subtle calibrations of my style or speech to appeal to their tastes.

Of course, some accommodation is organic to primary relationships. We make compromises and grow synchronized with our partners in both unconscious and conscious ways. But not everyone does in the way I tended to: a silent compulsion that incrementally warped my life into a shape that did not match my true self.

When my three celibate months became six I decided to keep going, without a deadline this time. I had begun to trust myself more. I had also come to know my own body as never before. Each day brought new opportunities to observe my physical experience unmediated by another person and their desires. I began eating different foods — only what I most wanted, when I was most hungry: plates of pickles and cheese at night or soup for breakfast. My own comfort and taste became my primary guides, and I began wearing sneakers instead of heels, and watched only TV shows featuring surly female detectives. I went for long, languorous runs without my phone and took frequent naps. I found a new enthusiasm for the college classes that I taught. I was not perpetually distracted by the daily permutations of a romantic life and so brought more of myself into every room, every activity, every conversation.

During my celibate period, I undertook the project of making an inventory of all my past relationships. I wanted to study their contours and observe my own patterns in the hope of changing them. I had always thought of myself as someone who wanted to be a good partner, an agreeable person. I hated conflict and avoided it, because some desperate part of me felt that to be the object of another's disappointment or resentment would amount to a kind of death. It turned out that avoidance — of conflict and, ultimately, truth — was itself a kind of death.

My relationship history also made clear that I had not succeeded at pleasing very many of my former partners. I would perform this self-pretzeling for a while, and then I would fill with an irresistible urge to leave them. Who wants to live in a knot? My fear of conflict made for ungraceful breakups. As a wise friend once said to me, "People pleasing is people using."

I saw how much energy I had consolidated inside my romantic life. By removing that option, my sensual relationship to all the other aspects of my life deepened. Ultimately, after about a year, it led to a more engaged sexual life, too.

When I did start a new relationship, I understood clearly what I desired and what patterns I did not want to continue. I articulated early on that I needed a lot of alone time, and described what I liked and didn't in bed. That celibate year was the beginning of truly enthusiastic sexual consent in my intimate relationships. What had been implicit in the past became explicit. It is no coincidence that the first person I dated seriously after my celibacy is now my wife. I am so grateful that we did not meet before I was ready.

I don't mean to suggest that spending some time intentionally celibate will guarantee you a happy marriage, only that it might offer a space to contemplate what sort of love you want and how to ready yourself for it. And whatever the future brings, you might just have the sexiest year of your life.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/06/opinion/celibacy-sex-relationships.html>

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About




Photo by Beowulf Sheehan

Melissa Febos is the author of four books, including the national bestselling essay collection, *GIRLHOOD*, which has been translated into eight languages and was a LAMBDA Literary Award finalist, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award in Criticism, and named a notable book of 2021 by NPR, Time, The Washington Post, and others. Her craft book, *BODY WORK* (2022), was also a national bestseller, an LA Times Bestseller, and an Indie Next Pick. Her fifth book, *The Dry Season*, is forthcoming from Alfred A. Knopf on June 3, 2025.

The recipient of a 2022 Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, a 2022 National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship, and the Jeanne Córdova Nonfiction Award from LAMBDA Literary, Melissa's work has appeared in publications including *The Paris Review*, *The New Yorker*, *The Sun*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Tin House*, *Granta*, *The Believer*, *McSweeney's*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Guardian*, *Elle*, and *Vogue*.

Her essays have won prizes from *Prairie Schooner*, *Story Quarterly*, *The Sewanee Review*, and others. She is a four-time MacDowell fellow and has also received fellowships from the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference, the Bogliasco Foundation, the American Library in Paris, Virginia Center for Creative Arts, Vermont Studio Center, the Barbara Deming Memorial Foundation, the BAU Institute at The Camargo Foundation, the British Library, the Black Mountain Institute, the Ragdale Foundation, and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, which named her the 2018 recipient of the Sarah Verdone Writing Award.

She co-curated the Mixer Reading and Music Series in Manhattan for ten years and served on the Board of Directors for VIDA: Women in Literary Arts for five. The recipient of an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College, she is a full professor at the University of Iowa, where she teaches in the Nonfiction Writing Program. She lives in Iowa City with her wife, the poet Donika Kelly.

To me, this reads kind of like a “Sex and the City” episode, maybe a character introduced for a year to counterpoint the others. Personally, I wonder if sex can ever prove to be about more than gamesmanship and power, with true, nonposturing, no-manipulation honesty—ironically, especially with women. TJB