

THE CONTINUUM: From Personal to Institutional Violence

Growing Up in a Sexual Jungle

BY MARIAN BOTSFORD FRASER

While Prime Minister Brian Mulroney was discussing the plight of children with world leaders in New York this past spring, a pregnant teenage girl was murdered not far from his house in Ottawa.

The 16-year-old girl's body, naked from the waist down, was discovered in an empty lot about halfway between 24 Sussex Drive and Parliament Hill.

The girl was described in the press as a prostitute, then as a runaway; she was a child. Her dolls probably still line the walls of a bedroom, and there will be a mess of report cards and sports-day ribbons and class photographs in a drawer somewhere. She probably had a closet full of clothes she had outgrown but couldn't bear to part with, and a stash of Archie comics and a ratty old teddy bear.

At some point, this child lost faith in herself, in her family and in her future. While her body underwent the protracted and unpredictable process of changing from that of a child to that of a woman, she received ideas about her sexuality that made her see herself as a commodity.

What kinds of messages do teenage girls get concerning their sexuality?

Teenage girls read teen magazines which, like most women's magazines, are glitzy shopping bags filled with cynical contra-

dictions. Earnest articles caution against overeating, undereating, excessive attention to appearances ("obsessing on your bod"), and anything other than squeaky-clean sex. At the same time, these magazines (*Seventeen*, *Sassy*, *YM*) are crammed with

pages of super-skinny supermodels in micro-minis, their hair more expensively groomed than the manes of show horses, their skins glowing with pricey emollients, their bright bodies and faces glorified as artifacts, objects of envy and desire.

In several of these magazines there are also grim black-and-white cellulite ads. Get a prettier bust, they shout; slash inches off your hideous thighs. These ads are graced with prone, anxious-looking teenagers in bikinis whose main concerns should be cell-splitting in science labs, not the non-existent cellulite on their adolescent limbs.

Teenage girls also receive overtly sexual messages from commercials, especially those for Beemans Gum and beer. The com-

mercials make a sizzling equation between good looks and good times with their combination of throbbing music and muscle, barely clad chests and pelvises, all youthful, all gorgeous.

Get beautiful, these creatures scream, get "la beer" or more improbably a wad of gum, get laid. Beauty is pleasure; pleasure is sex; that's all you know on earth and all you need to know.

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But the worst messages come from men. I have watched the way that grown men feel free to look at young girls. A fat white-haired man wheezing and sweating on a bench in a mall lets his eyes slide all over the body of a pretty teenage girl walking by. A man on the street grunts when he encounters two teenagers young enough to be his daughters. A businessman in his fifties mutters, "check out the hot blonde" to his buddy; the hot blonde is not yet 16.

Men on construction sites are infamous for everything from wolf whistles under their breath to outright obscenity contests, the object of which is a hapless passing woman or girl.

At some point in their physical development, all female children lose the protection of baby fat and barrettes and become prey in a game in which there are rules only if the law is broken. It is pretty much open season on their self-confidence, aspirations and propriety.

Perversely, as a society we force children into this game by enticing them into precocious sexualized roles. The hormonal shifts and swells that overtake them internally are paralleled by manipulation and seduction in the marketplace.

The wonder and pride they feel in seeing their bodies mature is cut with panic, as they discover both their power and their vulnerability. Girls learn very

quickly that their sexuality is a palpable, quixotic thing and that whereas a teenage boy strutting his stuff is considered healthy, even amusing, a teenage girl strutting her stuff is being provocative. She is "asking for it" before she is even clear about what "it" is.

But when a teenage girl is raped, or 14 young women are killed, we look to the individual circumstances for an explanation, instead of acknowledging the imbalances and injustices in our society. We seek amelioration in the lofty language of legislation and international treaties, and

maybe throw around a little (not much) public money. There are many ways to deal with a problem without looking directly at it or at ourselves.

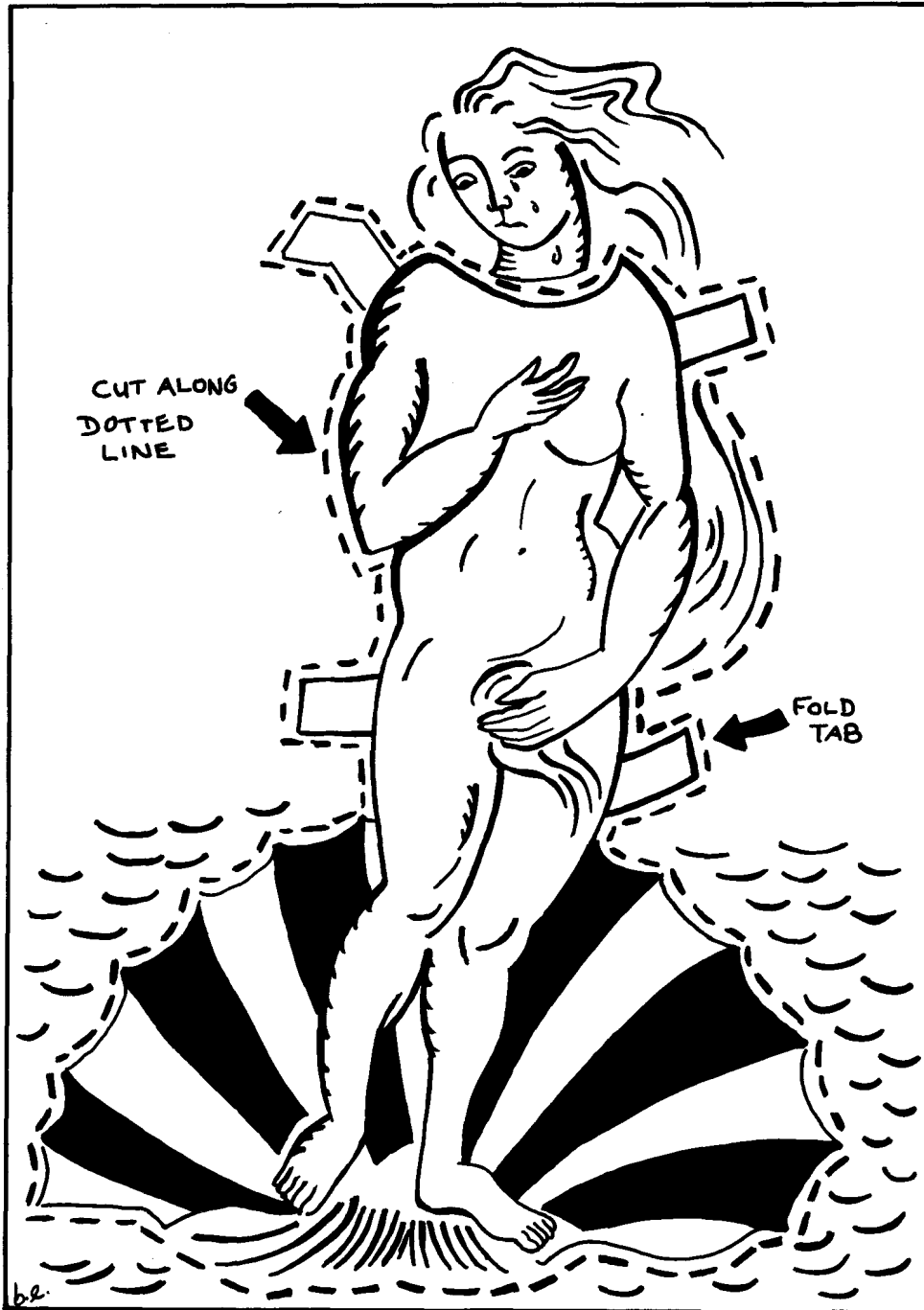
Men especially are reluctant to admit the connection between the vulnerability of a teenage girl and the trappings of a historically patriarchal society including themselves: their power, real and apparent, their bawdy jokes and concupiscent fantasies and little weaknesses.

Before sending our political leaders to international conferences on the plight of the child, we should send them for a walk

on the wild side, which here in Ottawa is only a short stroll away from Parliament and the walled precincts of the prime minister's residence. We should suggest they confront the daily realities of temptation, humiliation and fear to which our teenagers are exposed. See that right here in our public places and back yards, nothing is simple and squeaky-clean for our children as they approach adulthood.

Admit a collective responsibility: while all men are not, as individuals, potential rapists, all women and girls are potential rape victims.

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