

46 by Debra Spark

{Excerpt from work-in-progress}

When I see two middle-aged women out for a walk, my heart tightens with jealousy. I know what they're doing, after all. They're talking about sex. OK, maybe they aren't talking about sex. Maybe they're worrying about their kids or the state of the economy or the general fragility of life, but there's something about the pace and rhythm of a daily constitutional—I'm talking about walking for exercise here, not a just as a means of going somewhere—that lends itself to confession.

In my own experience, exercise wasn't always a pre-condition for disclosure. Not for women. Single, a gal could just pick up the phone, call a friend, and talk about sex. She could go out to a restaurant and lean over a meal or glass of wine and just share whatever needed to be shared. And as far as I'm concerned, things need to be shared. Otherwise, you're stuck with movies and literary depictions of sex—somebody else's fantasy, often enough. Hardly helpful. ("Wait, wait. Are you being yourself, Debra? Or could you possibly be aiming for Susan Sarandon in *Twilight*?)

But, once you're married, things change. First of all, the phone. You can't really confess, if there's someone (a husband) listening to what you have to say. Plus disclosure is now a betrayal, instead of a way of working out your thoughts and feelings. Back in the old days, you talked, because you needed help figuring out whether you should stay with your boyfriend or not. (Friend A: "You're kidding? He's never once gone down on you, so, how do you?" Friend B: "Who cares how she gets off? She should dump him. I always thought he was selfish.") But once you're married with

children and a job, you're not really going out with girlfriends for a chat. Or at least I'm not. That's why the walk has been, at least in my 40s, the one time I can say what it is I have to say.

Or I imagine doing so, until I realize that the confessions—at least among my non-writer friends, my writer friends are all decadents—are going in a direction that *doesn't* lend itself to *my* speaking up, because they're all about celibacy, weary celibacy. Lately, it seems, everyone's letting on to her lack of interest in sex. I remember a *Time* magazine cover a few years back. It pictured two anxious professionals in bed with their laptops. Well, that struck a chord. I knew what it was like to be too overwhelmed with professional obligations to turn a tender eye to my man, but ... and ahem ... I haven't lost interest in sex. In fact, I'm obsessed as ever.

Which feels like something I should have grown out of. Everyone else has. Well, everyone else who's talking has. It's not just that they're too tired for sex—who can't relate to that, male or female?—but it doesn't even occupy their imaginative lives. I remember a friend confessing that in her 30s everything was about sex and now everything was about Whatever did she say after that? I can't remember. I was just struck with the idea that sex might be something that you'd finally be sophisticated enough to do without. I could better relate to a 50-something acquaintance who said she'd gone to the doctor, because she thought something was wrong with her, as she'd lost all desire. The doctor told her it was completely normal, but when I asked how the sudden disinterest made her feel, she said, "Dead."

Of course, even if sex has diminished in popularity in the bedroom, it's still everywhere in the culture, not to mention on the Internet, and in the sexual innuendo and

gossip of adult talk.

Here's the opening to Mark Halliday's poem "Shmedlo Talk":

Did you hear about Clodia and Valerius?

I heard something.

What did you hear?

You tell me first.

Well, they were drinking wine under the fig tree last night

And, you know, they were kind of leaning toward each other.

They were leaning?

Yeah.

Are we talking about shmedlo?

What, wait, I didn't mean shemdlo.

You didn't?

Well, not yet.

And later, in the same poem, these words:

Well, I do sometimes suspect there's a lot more *talk* about shmedlo
than actual shmedlo.

Indeed.

There *does* seem to be more talking about shmedlo than actual shmedlo. And not much talk about shmedlo that seems too honest. Back to Virginia Woolf's 1931 lecture "Professions for Women," in which Woolf wonders whether she has yet told the truth about what it means to live in a body, whether any woman has yet told the truth. She concludes no, and since that time, I imagine, we've had some movement, revelations of all sorts, including how (un)easily women are moved to orgasm or the common observation that women are uncomfortable in their own skins. ("If only I could lose ten pounds") But still, there's a lot that's been left out. Have we, even with all the talk about estrogen replacement, breast cancer and menopause, told the truth about what it is like to live in a middle-aged body, to live with youth just past and the depredations of old age ahead? No, not yet, I suspect, and I'm not really the one to do it, I know, but I would very much, right now, like to find some friends and go for a walk.