friend told me as she flipped through a copy of the magazine she'd picked up off the coffee table. A few moments passed and then she looked up from a spread on college girls, wild eyed. "I'm going too," she said. "What the hell!" Then she went dashing in after them.

There was a sharp difference in aesthetic and attitude between the women in the lobby and the woman I was there to see. The Playboy offices are designed as glass fishbowls that you can see inside of when you approach from the stairs, so you can watch Christie Hefner long before you actually meet her. She has good skin and a short French manicure and she looks quite a bit like the actress Jo Beth Williams . . . you want to find Hef in her face, but he just isn't there. "You know I used to laugh when people would ask, 'How can you be CEO of a company whose products are sold to men?'" she said, smiling. "I said, gee, it never seemed to occur to people to ask that question all those years when all the *women's* fashion and cosmetic and everything else companies were run by *men!* Nobody sat around going, well, how would *he* know whether this would appeal to women?"

Actually, more than a hundred women literally did sit around on the floor of *Ladies' Home Journal* editor-in-chief John Mack Carter's office for eleven hours on March 18, 1970, with a list of "nonnegotiable demands" like "We demand that the *Ladies' Home Journal* hire a woman editor-in-chief who is in

touch with women's real problems and needs." But in any case, I wasn't there to question Hefner's ability to produce a product that appeals to men; the numbers show she can deliver that. I was there to hear about what Playboy does for women.

"A lot of women read the magazine," she said. "We know they read it because we get letters from them." And this was proof, she said, that the "post–sexual revolution, post–women's movement generation that is now out there in their late twenties and early thirties—and then it continues with the generation behind them, too—has just a more grown-up, comfortable, *natural* attitude about sex and sexiness that is more in line with where guys were a couple generations before. The rabbit head symbolizes sexy fun, a little bit of rebelliousness, the same way a navel ring does . . . or low-rider jeans! It's an obvious *I'm taking control of how I look and the statement I'm making* as opposed to *I'm embarrassed about it* or *I'm uncomfortable with it.* A little bit of that in-your-face . . . but in a *fun* way . . . 'frisky' is a good word."

I asked her why she supposed all these frisky, in-your-face women were buying *Playboy* instead of, say, *Playgirl.* "To say that the gap is closing isn't to say that the gap has closed," she replied. "You can't put male nudity on the screen and get an R rating; you can't put male nudity in an ad the way you can put female nudity in an ad and have it be perfectly acceptable. I mean, we still have a disconnect because of the attitude

that men have about being uncomfortable with being the objects of women's fantasies and gaze."

That would explain why men would be less likely than women to dream about one day appearing in the pages of *Playgirl.* (Why there aren't any men charging out of the lobby and into the photo shoots saying, *What the hell! It's worth a shot!*) But it doesn't explain why women would be buying the magazine, the rabbit head merchandise . . . the shtick. I think that has more to do with the current accepted wisdom that Hefner articulated so precisely: The only alternative to enjoying *Playboy* (or flashing for *Girls Gone Wild* or getting implants or reading Jenna Jameson's memoir) is being "uncomfortable" with and "embarrassed" about your sexuality. Raunch culture, then, isn't an entertainment option, it's a litmus test of female uptightness.

I asked Hefner how she felt about young girls aspiring to be in *Playboy*—girls like the ones she provides scholarships to through the Committee of 200. "The reason why I think it's perfectly okay is because the way women see being in the magazine is not as a career but as a statement," she said firmly. "It's a moment that lets them be creative. That can be as simple as *I just want to feel attractive,* or it can be very complicated, as has happened with a Vicky La Motta or a Joan Collins, saying, *I am older and I want to reassert the ability to be attractive now that I'm fifty.* Or: *I'm an athlete and I don't think athleticism in women is at odds with being sexy.* It can be something as profound

as [a woman] who had a car accident in her twenties and was a paraplegic and wrote us a letter wanting to be in the magazine and tell her story. So I think people who choose to pose for the magazine have a very definite idea of what they want to get out of it—and then they have a life and they may be an actress or a mother or a lawyer or an executive."

An actress or a mother sure, but a lawyer or an executive not necessarily. Putting your tush on display is still not the best way to make partner or impress the board. The only career for which appearing in *Playboy* is a truly strategic move is a career in the sex industry. In *How to Make Love Like a Porn Star,* Jenna Jameson writes, "Beginning with nude modeling is a nice way to ease into it." Many women who appear in Internet or home video porn were "discovered" in *Playboy.* Playboy discourages this practice, and several former Playmates have been barred from the mansion after breaking the unofficial rule against appearing in pornography (never mind the fact that Playboy itself operates the soft-core Spice television network). Still, porn directors continue to use *Playboy* and *Penthouse* as casting catalogues. Women who appeared in *Playboy* have also been recruited to be live-in hookers in the Sultan of Brunei's brother's harem.

The more basic way *Playboy* undermines the female sexual liberation Hefner claims to promote is this: The women who do go into careers outside the sex industry will never be seen by the millions of

men—and the growing number of women—who read *Playboy* as actresses or mothers or lawyers or executives; they will never be seen as themselves. They will only ever be seen spread out, in soft focus, wearing something slight and fluffy and smiling in that gentle, wet-lipped way that suggests they will be happy to take whatever is given to them. They are expressing that they are sexy only if sexy means obliging and well paid. If sexy means passionate or invested in one's own fantasies and sexual proclivities, then the pictorials don't quite do it. A model named Alex Arden, a former *Penthouse* cover girl, told interviewers from VH1:

> When you get yourself into the really contortionist position that you've got to hold up and your back hurts and you've got to suck in your stomach, you've got to stick your hips out, you've got to arch your back and you've got to stick your butt out all at the same time and suck in and hold your breath, you don't feel sexy. You feel pain. And you feel like you want to kill [the photographer].

The well-known nudie photographer Earl Miller, for his part, said, "Our job is to go out and bring 'em back alive or dead or whatever . . . we gotta get the picture." Porn queen Jenna Jameson echoed Arden's sentiment when she wrote about her early test shoots for mainstream men's magazines: "I had to arch so

hard that my lower back cramped. When I see those photos now, it seems obvious that sexy pout I thought I was giving the camera was just a poorly disguised grimace of pain."

Doesn't sound like something you would do for fun. There are some women who are probably genuinely aroused by the idea or the reality of being photographed naked. But I think we can safely assume that many more women appear in *Playboy* for the simple reason that they are paid to. Which is fine. But "because I was paid to" is not the same thing as "I'm taking control of my sexuality."

To hear Hefner tell it, you would think *Playboy* was a veritable cornucopia of different models of sex appeal—*handicapped! aging! buff!* But they gave me a big stack of magazines to flip through and the only variety I saw was the kind of variety you get when you look at a wall of Barbie dolls. Some have darker hair (but most are blonde), some have an ethnic- or professional-themed costume, but they all look very distinctly poured from the same mold. Individuality is erased: It is not part of the formula. When *Playboy*'s Olympian pictorial was out, for example, if you logged on to Playboy.com you were presented with several boxes to click on for previews; the choices were "athletes," "blondes," and "brunettes." It reminded me very much of shopping online for pants: "tweeds," "stretch," "jeans."

Why can't we be sexy and frisky and in control without being commodified? Why do you have to be

in *Playboy* to express "I don't think athleticism in women is at odds with being sexy?" If you really believed you were both sexy and athletic, wouldn't it be enough to play your sport with your flawless body and your face gripped with passion in front of the eyes of the world? Rather than showing that we're finally ready to think of "sexy" and "athletic" as mutually inclusive, the Olympian spread revealed how we still imagine these two traits need to be cobbled together: The athletes had to be taken out of context, the purposeful eyes-on-the-prize stare you see on the field had to be replaced with coquettish lash-batting, the fast-moving legs had to be splayed apart.

That women are now doing this to ourselves isn't some kind of triumph, it's depressing. Sexuality is inherent, it is a fundamental part of being human, and it is a lot more complicated than we seem to be willing to admit. Different things are attractive to different people and sexual tastes run wide and wild. Yet somehow, we have accepted as fact the myth that sexiness needs to be something divorced from the everyday experience of being ourselves.

Why have we bought into this? Since when? And how did this happen?

Raunch culture feels perhaps the most alien to aging hippies like my parents—they are all for free love, but none of this looks loving to them; it looks scary, louche, incomprehensible. And, in a way, the emergence of a woman-backed trash culture *is* a rebellion against their values of feminism, egalitarian-

ism, and antimaterialism. But even though this new world of beer and babes feels foreign to sixties revolutionaries, it is actually also a repercussion of the very forces they put in motion—they are the ones who started this.