

'I'm 25, a virgin and too scared to have SEX'

AT 25, CAROL RENFREW MIGHT EXPECT TO BE FIELDING ADVANCES FROM A STRING OF ELIGIBLE BACHELORS, BUT A DEVASTATING PHOBIA HAS LEFT HER TERRIFIED OF INTIMACY

BY HANNAH BARR

As Carol Renfrew walks up to the bar and orders a round of cocktails for her girlfriends, men glance appreciatively in her direction. Her dark blonde hair, gorgeous figure and pretty face turn heads wherever she goes.

Yet if any admirer dared to approach her, Carol would turn on her heels and flee.

Sounds bizarre? Absolutely. But for the last five years, Carol has suffered from a phobia of sex so extreme, she can't even bear to be chatted up by a man.

Carol's affliction is known as 'genophobia' – an irrational, intense, persistent fear of sexual intercourse. In some cases, genophobia is caused by a previous sexual trauma – although this is not true for all sufferers.

Carol's phobia has cost her friendships and robbed her of her self-esteem. Indeed, the fact that she is still a virgin fills the 25-year-old secretary with self-loathing.

"I feel like an outsider or a freak with a disfigurement," she says. "It's also led me to lose a best friend. We shared a flat and, like me, she was a virgin at 21. Then she got into a relationship and I was cut up with jealousy. Wondering whether they were sleeping together kept me awake at night and I started listening outside her door. When she found out, she couldn't forgive me."

Carol believes the roots of her phobia lie in her strict, traditional upbringing.

"It was a taboo subject in my house,"

she explains. "Mum and Dad never spoke about the emotional or physical nature of sex. If a sex scene came on the television, everyone would cringe with embarrassment. I would bury my head in a magazine so nobody could see me blushing."

To compound the situation, Carol's first and only love affair ended badly.

"I was 18 when I first met Alex, and I was ready to fall in love," she says. "We were both working as theatre ushers in Manchester, where I lived with my parents during university holidays. We flirted and I knew there was a spark between us."

"At the end of the evening, when he dropped me home, he stopped to kiss me. He left me tingling inside. As I lay in bed, I romanticised about us together. I thought I'd met the man I'd lose my virginity to."

But Alex was a devout Christian, and although the pair continued to visit each other at university every couple of weeks – Carol was studying in Birmingham and Alex in Manchester – they slept in separate beds.

"I fully respected his views," says Carol. "Every Friday or Saturday night, we would have a kiss and a cuddle but without fail I was always relegated to the air bed. It felt really odd to suppress natural desire."

Then in February 2001, after six months together, Alex suddenly called a heartbreaking end to the relationship.

"I was devastated," Carol recalls. "Just a week earlier, he'd told me he loved me for the first time. I felt so confused and the hardest thing was not being given a reason."



He just suddenly disappeared from my life one day and it felt like I was mourning him. I never spoke to him again."

Carol plummeted into depression and was prescribed antidepressants by her GP.

"I kept wondering what I'd done wrong," she says. "I completely lost my confidence. If anyone tried to chat me up, I'd freeze."

Before long, Carol started having panic attacks whenever a man approached her.

"I tried to date guys, but it always ended the same way – with me freaking out and running off. In January, when I moved to London, I went clubbing with my flatmate Jonny. We'd had a few drinks and we kissed."

"But the next day, when I realised he wanted more, I panicked. I locked myself in my room, sobbing uncontrollably. I started to hyperventilate

and had to breathe in and out of a paper bag. When he asked what was wrong, I didn't go into details but told him I didn't want a relationship. I knew he felt rejected, but I couldn't tell him the truth. The worst thing is that I really liked him."

Carol is now seeking treatment through hypnotherapy for her phobia.

"It's not as if I don't want to be sexually active or don't feel sexual attraction," she explains. "I fancy men and I know what lust and desire feel like. I just can't take that step into being sexually active. It terrifies me."

Clinical hypnotherapist Monica Black, who is treating Carol, says: "Like other sufferers of genophobia, Carol has very low self-esteem. I started her treatment by helping her relax and trying to make her feel good about herself. Restoring her self-confidence is paramount. Once this is achieved, her phobia can be easily worked on."

Carol hopes so. After three sessions, she's already feeling more confident.

"I feel like I haven't made the transition to adulthood yet and become a real woman," she says. "But I'm starting to see that one day it will happen for me."

'I FANCY MEN, BUT BECOMING SEXUALLY ACTIVE TERRIFIES ME'

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