Chapter 4
Discovering Sex

The !Kung have little privacy, either in the village or within the family dwelling. Parents and children sleep together, sharing their blankets, in small one-room huts that have no dividers or private sections. Adults try to keep children from noticing their sexual activity, but arranging meetings in the bush is difficult and young children often insist on accompanying their mothers wherever they go. The alternative is to wait until the children are asleep, and try to be discreet. But children, especially older ones, are curious, and a modest effort to stay awake (while feigning sleep) may enable them to observe their parents' lovemaking. Parents encourage older children, especially those in their early teens, to sleep elsewhere; often the children themselves initiate this transition, building huts to sleep in alone or with other adolescents. Occasionally they may choose to live with their grandparents for a while.

This early sexual awareness and curiosity flourish in the unrestricted free time that makes up much of the !Kung child's day. !Kung children have no schools, nor are they expected to contribute to subsistence, to care for younger children, or, except for occasionally collecting water, to help out much around the village. It is only in their mid-teens that girls—married or unmarried—begin to accompany their mothers regularly on gathering expeditions and to collect wood and water and that boys begin to go with their fathers on hunting trips.
Most parents prefer to leave all but the youngest children in the village while they gather: food collection is more efficient that way, and distances traveled can be greater. Also, most children want to stay at home with the other children: playing with friends is highly preferable to the stressful travel and long hours often involved in gathering. This is especially true in the hot, dry months of summer, when the sand burns the feet and water en route is available only in limited quantities carried in ostrich eggshell water containers. When children do accompany adults, they contribute almost nothing to the task at hand. Instead they spend their time eating—food given them and food they forage for themselves—and playing in the bush. Since women gather only about three days a week, there is usually someone either resting or working in the village who can supervise the children left behind.

One woman described it this way, “If you force a child to go gathering with you, she cries and makes it impossible to accomplish anything. If you leave her behind, she won’t cry and you can come home with a lot.” But in answer to my next question, she explained, “When I sit in the village and my children are playing around me, I don’t worry; I just watch what they do. When I leave them behind and go gathering, I worry that they won’t be well taken care of, especially if the only person in the village is there because she isn’t feeling well.”

In most societies around the world older children and young teenagers make substantial contributions to the economy, and their lack of such responsibility in !Kung life is striking. It reflects the stability and security of the !Kung subsistence base, and it seems to indicate that gathering and hunting, even in this marginal environment, is not a terribly arduous way of life: if the adult work load were too great, the !Kung would need only to tap the store of energy sitting idle in their young people. (In fact, teenagers often spend less time helping out than younger children do.)

Village life gives children a secure and socially rich environment in which to play. A village averages about thirty people—relatives, friends, and visitors, all of whom the child knows—and most activities take place outside, beside the fire that defines each family’s living space. Children have easy access to the entire village area and alternate between visiting at people’s huts and playing in the large communal space, denuded of shrubs and grass, within the circle of huts that forms the perimeter of the village. Sometimes they play in the bush just beyond this circle, but even then adults are usually near enough to respond to any trouble. Cases of children getting lost in the bush around the village or while out gathering are extremely rare, and the children are always found quickly.

Although a watchful surveillance is always kept, adults rarely interfere in children’s play, nor do they offer frequent suggestions. They do occasionally mediate fights, especially between children of unequal size, and they generally try to prevent children from getting hurt. The greatest danger in an otherwise fairly harmless village environment is fire, and burns—minor and severe—occur with an unsettling frequency. Despite parental admonishments, children are often seen picking up coals (and quickly dropping them again) or running from one fire to the next with burning branches or weeds. They also handle knives (double-edged, long and sharp) with what appears a casual abandon; yet cuts are rare. Poisoned arrows and spears, the most dangerous of the ordinary objects in the village, are carefully hung out of children’s reach. Owning little, the !Kung do not have to worry much about protecting their possessions from children’s harm (or vice versa), and children can safely roam throughout the village.

Because of the small number of families, village play groups are typically made up of only a few children of various ages—whoever happens to be living in the village at a given time. These groups, which may range in age from infants to young teens, usually stay around the village in the vicinity of adults or set up their own “villages” a few hundred yards away—within earshot, but not within view. Many of their games are imitations of adult activities: hunting, gathering, singing and trancing, playing house, and playing at parenthood and marriage. (Little children, carried about by older children, often become the “sons and daughters” of these “mothers and fathers.”) Occasionally their imitations become reality—foraging roots and berries in the
area just beyond the village, or even catching or trapping small animals and birds. Because little formal teaching is done—observation and practice are the basis of all learning—it is in these groups that children acquire many of the skills that will make them productive adults.

The nomadic travels of families have important effects on a child's play group. Its composition may vary from week to week, but the greatest influence on its size is the variation by season. In winter, when people congregate in large numbers near the few permanent springs, there are many children to play with. In summer, when the rains fill the land with standing water, people disperse—to visit relatives in distant villages or to live near food and game resources. A handful of families may travel together, or perhaps only one or two. This is a difficult adjustment for many children, and the return to the permanent springs is usually anticipated with enthusiasm.

!Kung girls and boys play together and share most games. Most cultures, including our own, consider some activities appropriate for girls and others for boys, and encourage the two sexes to play separately from an early age. Our desirous terms "tomboy" and "sissy" seem to have no counterparts in !Kung vocabulary. !Kung children are not segregated by sex, neither sex is trained to be submissive or fierce, and neither sex is restrained from expressing the full breadth of emotion that seems inherent in the human spirit. Although boys and girls both engage in roughhousing, imitation of adult aggressive behavior is rarely seen, and the elaborate preparations for learning to fight found among boys in many societies do not occupy the time of !Kung boys. Because the !Kung impose no responsibilities on their children, place no value on virginity, and do not require that the female body be covered or hidden, girls are as free and unfettered as boys.

Most childhood games involve little or no competition. Children play beside one another, sharing activities, but group rules are rarely established. Each child attempts, through repetition, to become more accomplished, not to defeat or outshine someone else. It is likely that the small number of children playing together and the lack of others the same age against whom to judge themselves encourage this attitude. But !Kung adults also actively avoid competition and the ranking of individuals into hierarchies. In fact, the cultural constraint against drawing sharp differentiations among people leads the !Kung to shun such determinations as winner, prettiest, and most successful, or even best dancer, hunter, healer, musician, or bead-maker. People are aware, of course, of the often impressive talents of others around them, and they derive great benefit from those talents; but it is considered extremely bad manners to call attention to them.

A closer look does reveal subtle distinctions in the kinds of activities engaged in by the two sexes. A study of !Kung children at play showed that boys were more physically aggressive than girls and that girls interacted with adults other than their mothers more than boys did. But, in contrast to studies of children's play in other societies, !Kung girls and boys were found to be equally active, equally capable of sustaining attention to tasks, and equal in the amount of time they spent playing with objects. Also, !Kung children showed no preference for playing only with children of their own sex.

!Kung children are essentially left to their own devices. Far from leading to boredom, this freedom results in inventive and energetic play, which characterizes much of their day. Although this play includes many different games and activities, sexual play is what many adults remember most vividly. The amount of such play varies from one group to another, but experimentation of some kind seems universal. Sexual play of younger children begins with boys playing together and girls playing together, and then changes to boys and girls playing with each other, with the boys as the usual—sometimes aggressive—initiators. The play of older children often involves some genital contact, but actual sexual intercourse does not seem to occur until years later, and some girls who marry young reach marriage without having experienced it.

Adults do not approve of sexual play among children and adolescents, but they do little to keep it from happening. They remember such play from their own childhood and, although they usually deny it, they know that their children are playing that way too. As long as the sexual play takes place out of the
adults’ view, children are not actively prevented from engaging in it. If they are caught, they are scolded and told to “play nicely,” but that is all. Children know they will not be intruded on in their play villages, and when they play “marriage” they feel quite grown up and far away from their parents—at least until they need food, or water, or the help of an adult to settle a fight.

Thus, life for the !Kung child appears generally hospitable, but for the nearly fifty-fifty chance of dying before reaching adulthood. All !Kung children live under this threat of disease and death, not only for themselves but also for their siblings. Even their parents are more vulnerable than are adults in cultures like our own, and many later-born !Kung children lose one or both parents before reaching maturity.

I am an old woman and know about things, because whenever I hear people talking, I listen. I’m going to tell you a story I heard my grandmother tell my mother about our mythical past, a story about the Beginning, when people still didn’t know about sex, when they didn’t know how to have sexual intercourse.

A very very long time ago, there were two women who built some huts; they were the only two living in their village. Elsewhere were two men who also were just living in their village. The two women lived in one place and the two men lived in another.

One day the men discovered the women’s village. The next day while the sun was low in the morning sky, they left their village and went with the idea of stealing the two women. But when they arrived, the women weren’t there—they had gone out collecting food and nuts. Later, when the women returned home, they put down the day’s gatherings and sat down. Only then did they see the two men. One said, “What? Where am I that there are also men there? My thoughts tell me we live in a place where there are no men. Are there really men here?”

Because these women were going to teach the men about sex. It was still early and the women just stayed around and ate. But when night came and sat, one of the men went over to one woman and the other man went over to the other woman. The two couples lay there for a long time. Then, one of the men wanted to have sex, so he got up and tried to have sex in the woman’s mouth. She said, “No, not like that.” He tried the woman’s eyes. She said, “No, not like that.” Next he tried her ear. “No, not like that.” Then, her nostrils. “No, not like that, that’s not how you have sex. Look, there’s a vagina over here, right between my legs. Now, with my mouth, I eat. With my eyes, I look for things. With my ears, I listen. And with my nose, I breathe. So, how come my vagina is sitting right here, yet you don’t try that? All you’ve been trying to do is to have sex with my face?” That’s when he took his penis and pushed it into her vagina, and that’s how they finally had sex—then, and during the rest of the night.

When dawn broke, the two men left in search of other people to tell, “Last night we found out how to have sex. There’s something called a vagina and that’s where you do it.” When the other people heard, they and everyone else started having sex as well.

At night, when a child lies beside her mother, in front, and her father lies down behind and her mother and father make love, the child watches. Her parents don’t worry about her, a small child, and her father just has sex with her mother. Because, even if the child sees, even if she hears her parents doing their work at night, she is unaware of what is her parents are doing; she is still young, without sense. She just watches and doesn’t have any thoughts about it.

Perhaps this is the way the child eventually learns, because as she gets older, she begins to understand that her mother and father are making love. At first she thinks, “So, that’s another thing people do with their genitals.” Then if the child is a little boy, he’ll take the little girl, or perhaps his sister, and do the same thing to her; he’ll teach himself. He’ll make believe he’s having sex with her as he saw his mother
and father do. And once he's learned it, he'll try to play that way with everyone.

As children get older, they start to become more aware of their sexual feelings. If, while they are sleeping in their parents' hut, they haven't fallen asleep and their parents start to make love... if they are just lying there, hearing everything, then they feel pain. They might think, "All right, so mother and father are just doing their work." But even so, when they hear, they start to get sexually aroused. Because older children are almost like adults and their sexual feelings are very strong; if they just hear other people making love, they get excited. So they just lie there, until dawn breaks. But when morning comes and they join the other children at play, they tell how they heard their parents doing their work the night before. Then, if the child is a little boy, when he sees a girl, he'll play sexually with her.

That's what an older child does. He waits until he is with a little girl and lies down with her. He takes some saliva, rubs it on her genitals, gets on top and pokes around with his semi-erection, as though he were actually having intercourse, but he is not. Because even though young boys can get hard, they don't really enter little girls. Nor do they yet know about ejaculation. Only when a boy is almost a young man does he start to have sex like an adult.

At first, girls refuse that kind of play—they say all that poking around hurts. But when they are a little older, they agree to it and eventually, even like it.

When I was still small, the work between a man and a woman, the work of living and lying down together, the work the adults took care of, and enjoyed, like dancing, the work of a man lying on top of a woman, of rising and falling and rising and falling over her, that work I didn't understand. At first, I thought, "Eh, hey... so that is something people do." And I thought it was the same thing the children did to me when we played.

It was only when I was older that I became aware of what my father and mother were actually doing when they lay down together like that. She would lie down, then they would lie down together, and then... their work would begin. That's when I thought, "When people do that, is the woman being killed? Perhaps something terrible is happening, where one person is killing the other. Is Daddy's work going to kill Mommy?"

Because at night, my father would lie with my mother. Sometimes, I still wouldn't have fallen asleep. I'd just be lying there in front of her and my father would be lying down behind her and I would watch. At first it didn't make me unhappy. But once I was older I started to think, "Why doesn't my father care that I might still be up? I'm fairly old now, why isn't he being more respectful of me? Adults should be concerned about others. Can't they see I'm not sleeping? Why is he lying with her?" I would lie there, thinking those thoughts. Or, other thoughts, "How come Mother and Father don't care? I'm already very grown up. They shouldn't have sex when someone hasn't begun to sleep. They should wait; then they could do it." And eventually, others: "No, today I won't just lie here, I'll go and sleep in another hut. My father obviously isn't thinking about me; his heart just goes ahead and does its work. I don't agree to that and I won't sleep in their hut. What value would continuing to sleep there have for me now?"

That's when I found a little hut, just for myself, and started to sleep there. They continued to do their things, alone in their hut, I suppose. That was their work. But why hadn't they been more concerned about me?

A child who is nursing has no awareness of things. Milk, that's all she knows. Otherwise, she has no sense. Even when she learns to sit, she still doesn't think about anything because her intelligence hasn't come to her yet. Where could she be taking her thoughts from? The only thought is nursing.

But when she grows and is bigger and begins to walk, she has many thoughts. She sits and starts to think about
things, and to think about her work—sexual play. Because when children play, that is what they do. Little boys play at sex and teach themselves, just as baby roosters teach themselves. Little girls also learn it with one another in the same way.

At first, boys play that play with other boys—poking their genitals around one another’s behinds—and girls play that play with little girls. Later, if a boy sees a little girl by herself, he takes her and “has sex” with her. That’s how little boys and little girls learn.

Little boys are the first to know the sweetness of sexual games. That’s why they do that when they play. Yes. A girl, while she is still young, doesn’t know about sex. Her thoughts don’t really understand. But a little boy has a penis and perhaps, while he is still inside his mother’s belly, he already knows about sex. Because boys know how to do things with their genitals, they know how to move them up and down. They just take little girls, pull them down and have sex with them. Even if the girls and boys are just playing, they do that.

When girls are alone, they sometimes play sexually together. But when boys are there, they don’t, because the boys are there to play that way with them. Girls can only touch genitals together; that’s not really much help. Boys are the ones with hardness, with penises; boys have their spears. Girls have no spears, they have nothing; only softness. They don’t have anything that moves around like a penis. So when girls are alone and take one another, they don’t do it very well. No, a little boy is best; he does it right.

When I was a small child, I played at nothing things. I had no understanding of things around me and didn’t know about sexual play. Even if we were just girls playing, we played nicely. Because there is good play and bad play. Bad play is when you touch each other’s genitals; good play is when you don’t.

But when I was older, I had some sense, and with that sense came the awareness of sex. That was still before the little girls and little boys actually knew what kind of play “play-

ing sex” was; we just talked about it. The boys would ask each other, “When you play at sex, what do you do?” and they would ask us. We would say, “We don’t know how to play that kind of play. You’re the ones always talking about it. But we, we don’t know. Anyway, however you play it, we won’t do it. Why can’t we just play?” That’s when the boys would say, “Isn’t having sex what playing is all about?” They would say, “You girls don’t know anything, so look, first we’ll play together, then we’ll get married, and then we’ll touch each other’s genitals and have sex.” The girls always refused, “Playing that way is very bad. Why do you keep saying we should do it when we don’t want to?”

Eventually my girlfriends started to play sexually with each other. They’d put saliva in their hands, rub it onto their genitals, and touch genitals together. I didn’t know how to do it and just sat, refusing. They’d ask, “How come you don’t play with us?” And I’d say, “If I did, my genitals would smell terrible. You put saliva on them and I don’t like that.” I’d wait around, and when they started to play nicely again, I’d join them and we’d play and play and play.

Not long after, some of the girls started playing that kind of play with little boys. They learned about it long before I did; they taught themselves and didn’t cry. I refused for a very long time before I learned. I didn’t know what it was, and I cried whenever the boys asked. They’d say, “How come you always cry when we play?” I’d say, “Because you say we should play sexually, that’s why.” Other times I’d say, “I’m going to tell Mommy you said we should do that.” Because I didn’t want to play bad play and stay with the other girls who cried. We stayed together and refused together.

But we did watch. We watched the others to see what they were actually doing. Even so, whenever we saw them playing that way, we cried. Only after we had seen it over and over again and felt we understood—when we felt we knew exactly what they were doing—only then did we stop being so afraid. Finally, we agreed. That’s when I thought, “So, when you’re a child, touching each other’s genitals must
be the way you play.” Because after watching the others, I started to play that way myself. Eventually, I liked it.
Because children, their hearts just like one another. They play together like that. That’s how they grow up.

And that’s how we grew up. We would leave our parents’ village and set up a small, “grown-up” village of our own nearby. We played at gathering food from the bush, at bringing it back and eating it. Then we “married” and played sexually together. We played like that all day.

If one of our fathers had killed an animal, we would go back to the village to get some meat, take a little can or a pot and, our hearts happy, bring it to our little village. We would spend the rest of the day living in our village. One boy would sit with one girl and another boy with another girl. We would sit there, cooking meat and giving presents of it to one another, just like adults. When the meat was finished, one of the children would go get more, bring it back, cook it and serve it again. Only when the sun stood late in the sky would we return to our parents’ village to stay. But even there, we would just continue to play.

When I was older, I began to fear that adults would see what kind of play we were playing, and I learned to sit around like them. Before that, the adults would sometimes yell at us—especially if we were playing sexually in the heart of a group of people. Because little children aren’t afraid of adults. Even if they are right in their midst, they just play sexual games. They have no fear; they have no sense. They don’t think that people might see and yell at them.

Some days, I stayed in the adult village with my younger brother. Other days, I joined the children. We would play ordinary play for a while. Then they would want to take me. Sometimes when I refused, they threw me down and held me, then pulled off my leather apron and had sex with me. It hurt! Is a penis not like a bone? They’d poke it around and the hurt was like it was killing me. I’d cry and cry and cry. I was still a child and didn’t know any of its sweetness.

But other times I’d agree. That’s how we lived, sometimes playing ordinary play, other times playing the play of lying down together.

The boys would sometimes accuse us of being unfaithful. They would say, “People tell us that you like other men.” We’d say, “No, we don’t like other men. What’s wrong with you that you think that?” They’d leave and say, “Let’s leave the women by themselves.” Other times, they’d say, “No, these women are doing bad things, they have lovers. Today, we’re going to hit them, hit them so they won’t make love to other men.”

One time I went with a friend back to the village to get some blankets. When we came back, we covered ourselves and lay down. The boys came and lay down with us. Later, I told the adults, “Everybody! Everybody! We were playing today and the boys ‘screwed’ us.” The older people said, “If the boys try to touch your genitals, leave them and play only with the girls. Let the boys play by themselves.” I said, “But even when we play alone, they sneak up on us and chase us. Then they play with us and ruin our genitals.” (That’s what we called it.) The adults said we should tell the boys to leave us alone, that we should only play nice games. They said it was wrong for us to play with our genitals.

Later, I thought that I shouldn’t have told. Why had I? The adults only yelled at me. So after that, I didn’t say anything. We just played and played and I never said anything again.

Another time the boys asked us to play and I said, “Keya and I are going to go off and play by ourselves. You want to play sexually. Go play your play. But we won’t. You want us to do something bad.” The boys said, “That’s not why! You’re going off together so you can screw!” We said, “Not true. Do we have penises to have sex with each other with? Can two vaginas screw?” The boys said, “You’re always playing sexually together. That’s why you refuse us.” We said, “All of you are crazy. Go play your play. We’re going to stay by ourselves.”
They threw sticks at us as we walked away. We yelled back, “You’re not having us... too bad!”
Later, we returned. We asked, “How come you left us? Aren’t we playing together anymore?” They said, “What? You’re the ones who left us. You were afraid we would play sexually with you. That’s why you left. Right?” We said, “Yes, because touching each other’s genitals is bad. That’s what our mothers told us.” The boys said, “Your mothers were fooling you. So let’s make believe we’re lovers and that we have to sneak away to the bush to meet. Except Nisa, because whenever we play like that, she goes and tells.

Keya and I built some little huts and played together while the others played inside their huts. After a while, we sneaked up on them. We yelled out suddenly, “Aie! Look what they’re doing!” One of the boys said, “The two of you are going to be shitting pretty soon. That Nisa, she has no brains. She’s like a baby—no thoughts! What’s the idea of sneaking up on us like that?” We cried, “You’re screwing! You’re screwing!!! You’d like to screw us too, but we refuse! Sex is bad and makes your genitals smell rotten.”

We stayed there playing like that. Later, we returned to the adult village. There the boys said “Come on... everyone... let’s go back to our village and play.” We took our blankets and things there. Keya and I entered our hut. The others, with husbands, were in their huts. We visited each other, just like adults.

Two boys came over to us, “Let’s lie down and do our work as the others are doing.” We said, “When you do that work, how do you do it? What work are you talking about.” They yelled, “Our work is—screw! screw... We’ll show you. We’ll be your lovers because we already have wives in the other huts over there. We’ll come and do what lovers do, then go back to them.” We said, “So that’s what you’re talking about? You’ve come here to make love to us? Well, the answer is no. We are two women who have no husbands and you two are married. Since we have no husbands, we’ll follow you back to your village and eat meat and food there. We’ll stay and all of us will just live together.” The boys refused, “No, what we’ll do is this. My brother and I will go out to the bush, find things to eat, and bring them to you. Then we’ll be your lovers. After that, you can visit our wives. Later, we’ll even come back and ask you to be their co-wives.” We said, “Look, we’re just children. Let’s just play nicely. That’s all we want to do.” We joined the others and just played other kinds of play.

Eventually, Keya and I had boyfriends and learned. Keya was with Besa, and I was with Tikay. The two of them taught us about men, and once we knew it, we played that way every day. We’d build little huts and have sex there. That was when I realized that playing like that was a good thing. I thought, “How come this thing is so nice, yet I refused it? The other children knew about it but I had no sense. Finally, I have learned and now I know that when you are a child, this is something you do. You teach it to yourself.” At the time, I still didn’t understand about sexual pleasure—I just liked what Tikay did and I liked playing that play.

After Tikay taught me, I really liked him! When we played, the children said I should play with other boys, but I refused. I only wanted Tikay. I said, “Me? I won’t take a horrible man. I won’t go off with someone who’s ugly.” They teased Tikay, “Hey... Tikay... you’re the only one Nisa wants! She refuses the rest of us!” But Tikay said, “That’s all right. I’ll play with her.”

Once Tikay tore off my pubic apron and threw it up in a tree where it just stayed, hanging. He wanted to have sex with me, but I didn’t want to. He grabbed me and I fought with him; he grabbed my chest and grabbed all over my body. Even though I still had no breasts, he kept grabbing and holding on to me. I said, “Are my genitals supposed to be having sex? No, I haven’t even started to develop yet. You’re the one with the penis, but me, I have no genitals to have sex with. Because just as you have a penis, I don’t have a vagina! When God made your penis and put it there, God didn’t make a vagina to put there for me. I have no vagina at all. My genital area is bare. So how can you have sex with something that’s not there?” He said, “I’ll have sex with you! You’re lying! Aren’t we friends? Aren’t we the same age?
You're a child and I'm a child. Why are you saying things like that to me?"

He came and grabbed me again. I refused and started to cry. That's when he tore off my pubic apron and threw it up in a tree. I shouted, "I don't care! Feel bad! You won't have sex with me!" I stood there crying, covering my genitals with my hands because there was nothing else covering me. I left them playing in the bush and ran alone back to the village. Mother gave me another pubic apron and soon I went and joined them again.

After a while, everyone left to play in a large water pan. I said, "Tikay, climb up and get me my pubic apron." He refused. I asked him again, and again he refused. Finally I asked my cousin, who went up and brought it down. I put it on, on top of the one my mother gave me, and wore both of them.

Some days all the girls refused the boys and went off together and played. Sometimes Nai and I married. I really liked her—she was beautiful! Other times I married Kunla and we played together. Sometimes we even refused to be with the other girls and Kunla and I went off together and played, sometimes sexually, other times not. We used to make believe we were giving birth to children and took turns being the baby. We'd play alone that way until the boys sneaked up on us and separated us. Then each of us would take our husband and our hearts would continue to be happy.

When there was a lot of rain and the water pans were full, we played in the water. One day, while we were splashing around in a large pan of rain water, the boys said they wanted to have sex with the girls, right in the middle of the water. I told Tikay, "No, if you do, you'll kill us. The water will come into our nostrils and we'll drown. We'll gasp until we die, so don't try it here." Then I bit him, "Anyway, you're dumb! Do my genitals belong to you? What makes you think you have me now?"

When we left, we went back to play in the bush, in our little village. We entered our huts and stayed there, playing. The boys pretended they were men, that they were tracking an animal and that they struck it with their poisoned arrows. They took some leaves and hung them over a stick, carrying them as though they were strips of meat. The girls stayed in the village, and when the boys came back, we pretended we were living there and eating—until all the meat was gone. On the next hunt, the boys took the girls and we followed along. After we found another animal and killed it, we all carried the meat back: the girls, in their karosses, and the boys, hanging it on sticks. We played in the bush like that, pretending we were living there, getting water and eating meat.

One time we all left and moved to the East, near the Hereros. The first time I saw cows' milk, I wouldn't drink it. I just sat there, looking at it, and refused. I was afraid of the Hereros, and ran away whenever a Herero man or woman came near. I soon learned not to run away, but I was still afraid of them, and when the children played, I wouldn't play sexually with them; I'd just get up and leave if they tried to touch me.

While we were still there, Tikay started playing with one of the young Herero girls. He told me to find another boyfriend. I didn't want to and just stayed by myself. "I don't want another boyfriend. I'll stay alone in the single-women's hut. If I don't want to play sexually, what difference does it make? The rest of you, just marry without me." Because I really liked Tikay and wanted him to play with me, not with the other girl, I wanted to be the only one.

Tikay made me one of his two wives. My hut stood in one spot and the young Herero girl's hut stood in another. Tikay would lie down with me for a while, then go and lie down with her. But she was just as jealous of me as I was of her. She'd say, "How come your boyfriend doesn't lie down with you, but only lies down with me?" That really wasn't true. Tikay acted just like a grown man with two wives: he'd stay with me a few days, then go to the Herero girl's hut for a few days.

Until one morning, I said, "In the beginning, you had only me. Now, you have set someone else beside me. I don't
want to do co-wives anymore. We'll have to separate." He said, "Haven't I been treating you well? Don't you know how to do co-wives?" I said, "No. When you are children, you don't play at having co-wives. One girl should play with one boy and other girls with other boys. I told you I didn't want to play sexually at the start, but you said we were only playing. Now, if we're only playing, how can you want me to have a co-wife?"

But I really liked him!

I met Tikay again, quite recently, and there we were, two adults. Even then he said, "Nisa, when we were children I taught you about men. Now that I'm a grown man, why don't I lie down with you again, the way we used to?"

While we lived in the East, I played with the children I had played with for years. But then my family left and went to live near my mother's sister at the Chotana water hole. But once there, I wouldn't play; I just stayed with the adults and thought about my friends in the East. I said, "I miss the children I used to play with. Mommy, didn't you say we were going to go back East? Mommy ... Daddy ... let's go back there again." But they said, "What would we be wanting there?" I said, "I want to be with the children I played with. Where we're living now, I don't see any children." They said, "Right over there ... just go over there and you'll find children to play with—your aunts and nieces and cousins. Play with them." I said, "Not true, there aren't children here. Let's go back East. I don't want to play with my cousins." I started to cry. I missed my friends and cried and cried. My parents told me I must surely be crazy not to want to play with my cousins.

But I could see them as I sat there. I watched them playing and thought, "Those children over there ... no, I won't go over to them." One day my cousin Tasa came over to me, "Nisa, come play with me." I said, "I don't want to." She said, "Let's go play in the pan and swim in the water." "I don't want to swim." I sat there, refusing everything she suggested. Finally, she pulled me up, took me with her, and we went off together. Later we joined the other children and played with them. We just played nice play: going to the water pan, swimming around, going back to the village, going back to play in the water again. On the way we sometimes collected na and nin berries to bring back. We played one game for awhile, went back to the village, and then played something else.

A child has no sense and just tries to do as the adults do. That's why, even with my cousins, we eventually played sexually together. Whenever my cousin Tuma wanted to play that way with the girls, we'd be mean to him. Then he'd be mean back to us. He'd hit us and make us cry. I'd say, "Leave us alone. My boyfriend is no longer with me and I won't have sex with anyone else. My boyfriend is in the East."

You see, I, too, was senseless and didn't understand anything—I thought there was only one boy who was mine and that there wasn't anyone else.

I said, "My husband is in the East. Besides, there are only ugly men here and I won't have any of them. My husband is handsome and isn't like the men here, who are so very ugly. My husband is beautiful. The rest of you here are awful!"

Then I said, "Anyway, you, Tuma, you've got an enormous penis! I don't want to be with someone like that!" He said, "We're going to play and have sex with Big-Vagina over there." He meant me. "Big-Vagina! Aren't you also Nisa, the crazy one?" "How come you're insulting me?" I said, "Tuma, your penis is so big, you'll never have sex with me! You'll always feel ashamed because you want me!"

We started to fight. I bit him and he hit me. I said, "You won't have me! Think about that! If you try, I'll tell my mother and she'll scare the shit out of you, you Big-Penis!" He said, "You think I want to have sex with Nisa-Big-Vagina? Is there anyone who thinks her genitals are good?" I said, "Feel bad! You're the one who wants me! Why don't you have sex with someone else? If you came to me, what could I possibly learn from you?" He said, "You think your genitals are so great, don't you? Well, they're not and you're ridiculous!" I said, "What? There's not a female around here with
the name Nisa who would have sex with such a large penis 
as yours. If you want sex so badly, why don't you have it 
with your little sister? Isn't that something children do? When 
we lived in the East, Besa used to play that way with his sis-
ter. So, go have sex with her. If you won't, why do you say 
you will with me?" He said, "Nisa-Big-Vagina! Who taught 
you to talk like that? Have sex with my sister! Don't you 
know you're not supposed to do that?" I said, "Feel bad! Be-
cause that's just what you want to do! You with the big 
penis, go have sex with your sister!"

Tuma's sister said, "Nisa, you're crazy! What are you tell-
ing him that for?" I said, "You're the one who's crazy, not 
me. Now go tell him to come to you. Tuma, go, screw your 
sister. She'll be your girlfriend." As Tasa and I started to play, 
I said to her, "Now, don't you have sex with him. If you did, 
he'd tear open your genitals."

We all lay down. Tasa and I lay together and Tuma and 
his sister lay under some blankets together. The blankets 
started to move. We watched. I whispered to Tasa, "Look! Do 
you see that?" We were quiet. Suddenly, we screamed very 
loud, "Are you crazy? Screwing your sister? Oooh! Big-Penis is 
screwing his sister! We're going to tell!" Tuma yelled back, "I 
swear . . . if you tell, I'll take my father's poison arrows and 
kill the two of you." We said, "Em—bar—rassed!!! We've 
caught you. You're not supposed to screw your sister, don't 
you know? You have no brains in your head. Now, leave her 
alone." He said, "I'll keep doing just what I'm doing. What 
thoughts should I be thinking that would make me be afraid 
of her?" We said, "Well, our siblings are respectful of us. 
They never do what you're doing. But that's because you're 
stupid."

A few months later, we left Chotana and went back to 
live again at our old water hole. All my friends were there, 
and when I saw them I was happy again. We played and 
played and danced and sang, played music and sang and 
danced, and my heart was happy to be with the children I 
liked.

We used to make believe about everything. We made be-
lieve we cooked food and took it out of the fire. We had 
trance dances and sang and danced and danced and sang and 
the boys cured us. They went, "Xai—i! Kow-a-di-li!" They 
cured us and we sang and danced and danced, danced all 

Sometimes we played with the children from another vil-
lage; sometimes we just played by ourselves. Other times, the 
other children came and found us playing and went back 
with us to our little village. They'd greet us just as adults do, 
"How are all of you?" And we'd answer, "Eh, we're just fine." 
We'd stay around together and then they'd say they were 
going back to their village and were going to play at making 
a trance dance. So we'd go with them and dance and sing. 
Sometimes the sun set while we were there, but even though 
 it was dark, we just stayed in the center of the village and 
played. We'd sometimes stay into the night, dancing and 
singing, and only leave when it was time to go home to 
sleep.