

**MY
SEX-LIFE
CHRIS KNIGHT**

50p

**WOMEN
& LABOUR
COLLECTIVE.**



Before the image cracked:
Ann, Chris, Rosie; Brighton, November 5, 1974.

IN THE BEGINNING

All of us have had to suffer to become revolutionaries. In my case, the suffering was primarily sexual. For women, this kind of suffering is normal in our social system, but for a male it is not so usual. I was totally sexually impotent until I reached the age of thirty. I am fairly sure now that I know what the causes of this were. They were the experiences which I received as a child in a pretty patriarchal, occasionally violent and psychologically oppressive nuclear family situation. The family was religious (Roman Catholic), and we lived throughout most of my childhood spatially and socially isolated in a farmhouse — moving from one impoverished smallholding or farm to another about every two years. No family can live in such isolation for long without things going wrong. The unit is simply too small, and the relationships within it consequently too intense.

In my case, all the typical ingredients of such an upbringing were there, almost as if copied from a Freudian textbook. There were rivalries with my father for my mother's affection, my father's own sexual frustrations in a religiously "moral" family unit, quarrels with my younger brothers and my sister for parental favours (my sister was Dad's favourite!), my own frequent nightmares almost from infancy until I was seven — and so on. In a way, I had advantages since I was the eldest. But

the result of all the pressures was a constant feeling of insecurity, an experience of my life as in essence a bitter struggle — and, consequently, my eventual adolescent inability to surrender in the act of giving necessary if a man is to be taken over by a woman in sex and in love. Potency presupposes what might seem its opposite — the capacity to surrender power and "let go", knowing that at least one other human being will be there to catch you as you fall. I didn't have that confidence.

It was my mother's love, I suppose, which despite everything kept me going through my childhood, and which I was ultimately able to rediscover within myself and return when I made love for the first time six years ago. Anything I have been able to achieve as a loving person then or since has been, I would say, almost wholly despite my father's early influence, not thanks to him. Like so many Dads, he was just not very good at loving his kids. I still love my mother unquestioningly, as all five of us children did and as most people do. As for my father (Denis), everyone who knows us will know how close — I think unusually close — he and I are as friends and political comrades today. He abandoned religion and became a Marxist a year or two after we children (the eldest three of us) had done the same. I don't think it is often that children succeed in converting their fathers, but we did!¹

¹ Denis had always been on the far left of the Catholic Church, and for a period used to subscribe to a paper from America called the "Catholic Worker". I know what he went through, particularly as a private soldier and tank driver throughout the war. And I know the early religious, philosophical and political struggles which he fought, at bottom on behalf of everything which I now believe in. In family matters I always sided fully and instinctively with my mother in the

quarrels which used to seem to me so traumatic, but to me it would now seem unthinkable and ridiculous to direct the bitterness I felt as a child — and still feel — against my father personally. My parents have been extremely close to each other for the past few years. Denis was a victim of the system, just as we all are. And in any case, in a way I'm grateful that things happened as they did: I wouldn't have been the revolutionary I am now if it had all been pleasant and easy!

I am writing all this for a purpose. Women often cannot understand why a man should be a feminist. Some feminists firmly deny the very possibility. I have often been challenged on this point, and asked what genuine interest I could possibly have in any real emancipation of women. I am writing this to explain why I personally feel oppressed by sexism, and why to me my "vested interest" in the emancipation of women seems perfectly legitimate and real. I don't feel in any way that my position is a "false" one or that I ought to feel embarrassed or apologetic. I am a feminist on account of my felt material interests.

* * * * *

My "vested interest" seems real from the standpoint of my childhood, but it also seems no less real from where I stand as an adult and father today. But to explain this, I must say something more about myself. Again, I hope I am making clear that I am only doing this because I am so often challenged on the point, not because I feel any inner urge to "bare all" in print. Actually, I find writing about myself extremely difficult — which is why I've never done it before, and hope not to have to do it again at least for some time!

I should also make it clear that I don't believe that there are two kinds of men, sexists and non-sexists. I believe that, as individuals left to ourselves, we are all sexists — and that I am absolutely no different from other men. Just on the question of pornography — to take an example — there have been times when I have gazed at "girlie" pictures in the way most men can do. It's not that I can claim to be "different" in that respect. It's just that I'd rather not feel so demoralized as to actually feel the need for porn of any kind. I know the kinds of personal situations of loneliness, rejection and other things which drive men to dreams of unlimited sexual power, passive, ever-welcoming females and so on. But — like most men, given the chance — I would rather live in a different structure of relationships: the kind which make all kinds of pornography seem a sad and cruel joke played not only upon women but upon men as well. I now know the kinds of relationships which give real fulfilment, and I would like to be rescued — and help rescue myself — from my sexism and be placed within these kinds of relationships. Their precondition is real women's solidarity, equality and power.

* * * * *

So I suppose I must carry on with my story. I want to explain why even today, when I have a stable relationship and two children, I can still assert that it is in my material interests to be a feminist. I want to explain what I think is wrong with an exclusive pair-relationship, what needs to be preserved from such kinds of relationships, and how I think we can organize ourselves to make things better all round.

I met Ann Bliss in 1973, on the first day in March. Ann's father is a printer. Her mother is an East-ender, originally from the Isle of Dogs. Ann herself went to secondary modern school and left at sixteen (her father dissuaded her from going any further in school or college). She has lived in Catford all her life. March 1, 1973, was the date of the

Lincoln bye-election, in which a once-famous (and now deservedly-forgotten) Dick Taverne, former Labour MP, was standing against the official Labour candidate (Taverne's personal response to his local Labour Party's refusal to re-nominate him). Ann had been an active Labour Party member for some years, and had recently been working as a secretary at Transport House. The Transport House staff had been asked whether they would volunteer to go canvassing in Lincoln on March 1, and Ann had agreed to go. I had been the editor of the *Chartist* for a couple of years, and had been more or less told by my organization in the Labour Party to go to Lincoln on the same day (I remember not particularly wanting to go!)

Ann and I got on the same special coach outside Transport House. I remember thinking how attractive Ann looked as she got into the coach and sat down a few seats in front of me, but we never talked or even exchanged glances until the canvassing was over and we were both back on the coach, waiting to be taken back from Lincoln to London. Ann got into the seat behind me. I was quietly reading some passages from Lenin's "The State and Revolution" — readings of that kind being, during that period of my life, one of my few ways of relaxing. I was at a passage which read something like "the state machine must be utterly smashed", when a young feminine voice almost shouted from over my shoulder: "I agree with that!" Ann, for some reason, had decided to get to know me. We talked about revolution and related things all the way as the coach took us home. What a comrade! Ann had never had any contact with Trotskyism before, but seemed to take it all almost for granted. She needed no-one to tell her. Before I got off the coach at Cricklewood, where I then lived, I took Ann's name and address, promising to send her the *Chartist* every month.

I should say that I had immediately felt attracted to Ann. She seemed the best working-class fighting woman I'd ever met! Previously I had been very lacking in confidence, and had almost always shied away from women, but at that time things were changing inside me. On the one hand, I had had some success in helping to organize the *Chartist* group and felt confident that we would grow; on the other hand I had crystallized in my head my theory of the origins of human society, and learned how to speak on the subject in a way which sounded more or less convincing to some people at least. This theory had been in a sense the most important thing in my life, and had been almost obsessing me since the germs of it were suggested to me by some things I had read in 1967 and 1968. Discussing it with others was giving me some feeling that my existence on this planet was not entirely without meaning or purpose. Anyway, if Ann had met me under similar circumstances a year or two earlier, she would probably have found a more morose and less responsive person. Ann might still have talked and tried to do something for me, but I doubt whether she would have succeeded.

I walked home, thinking lovingly of Ann. Even the following day and the day after I couldn't help picturing her and thinking of her. But I didn't know whether she was thinking of me. I sent her the *Chartist* regularly, sometimes with a note on some political point or other, and she wrote back. But the correspondence was entirely political. Then, in July,

we met by arrangement outside the Houses of Parliament. While waiting for her to come I felt sick with nervousness, and I remember that when she did turn up she was chewing gum and looking slightly different from the way I had been picturing her. We sat and talked about politics and anthropology on a bench overlooking the Thames. It didn't go particularly well, and then Ann casually mentioned the fact that she was married! I had had no particular indication that she felt much for me, so my heart sank at this news. We walked up to Whitehall and caught a bus together. I got off at Piccadilly Circus while Ann stayed on. As we parted I felt that I had been fooling myself all along and that there was no reason to imagine any special relationship existing between us. Ann said something about meeting again, and we must have arranged a time and place, but I was hardly listening by now. I resolved to plunge back into politics and not to allow myself to be so easily distracted again.

A week later, I think I had almost managed to forget all about Ann. I was at home in Cricklewood with five or so comrades, typing and pasting up the *Chartist*, when at about 7.00 in the evening there was a knock at the door. My brother Kevin told me that there was a girl there. For a moment I was puzzled — and then suddenly I remembered Ann. And there she was. She had waited for me in town, and then decided to come round and see me. I explained about having to do the work on the paper, but she said she would like to help. We talked all evening as we worked. When Ann left at about 10.00 p.m. I walked out with her a short way, to show her the way to the Underground. And then it happened. Ann took hold of me and kissed my face and lips for several seconds before disappearing into the night.

She had given me no warning and I was in a daze. I walked home feeling glowing and warm inside. The paper had to be at the printer's the next day, so I stayed up almost all night to finish it and then went to bed. I slept into the morning and the following afternoon. I kept half waking and then falling asleep again: I have never had such lovely dreams. I remember getting up in the early afternoon and wandering through the upper part of Gladstone Park as if in a trance, with the whole world seeming to bathe the inside of my head with colours and light, the tops of the trees shimmering in the light and breeze so clearly and with such a lovely rustling sound that they seemed only a foot or two away. Every vein on every leaf stood out clearly and seemed to almost cut into my retina. It was as if I were seeing leaves for the first time in my life — and the blue sky, and the dark bark, and the sunlight on the blades of grass. I rubbed leaves in my face, felt the grass, sat on a little bench in the rose garden and cried to myself, unable to stop. The garden itself seemed like a miniature paradise, and I was in it. I hadn't cried for years, and it hurt my eyes and chest. But something was happening to me which was much, much stronger than me. Somehow, deep down, I dared to hope that my impotence would not doom me for the rest of my life.

For me, all hope in my eyes had previously been identified with "the revolution." I wrote to Ann that same afternoon, saying that she was for me the revolution I had always dreamed of. That was how I

pictured her. She was to me, firstly a lovely woman, and secondly and inseparably, a working class fighter and revolutionary who had come to the ideas I believed in quite independently of any Marxist group. In the discussions I had had with her, I had long since discovered that she was a real fighter, particularly on issues connected with the women's movement. And now I felt my love for her merging with all my revolutionary hopes.

I am perfectly well aware today of all the potentially or actually sexist implications of much of this, in that I wanted Ann all to myself, I was wallowing in the fantasies of bourgeois sex-love and so on. But it seems to me obvious that the feelings I had then were in the main those kinds of feelings which socialism will rely upon, bringing them out from their restriction in the sphere of private sexual relationships and turning them into a human solidarity which will form the basis of all social life and embrace the world.

* * * * *

Regarding Ann's marriage, I remember the mixed feelings I had. I didn't know what to think, or what the real situation was. What I wrote in my letter to Ann was that I wanted to get to know her husband and be friends with him, asserting that I didn't want Ann to myself exclusively. Perhaps I persuaded myself that I meant that, I don't know. In any case, I felt I had to say it. Ann appeared to me then as someone too militant and feminist for any man to succeed in keeping her to himself, so the idea didn't seem too far-fetched. Ann seemed to me so generous with her happiness and love that I imagined it spilling over like the sunlight and shining on all of us.

A week or so later, Ann told me that her husband was sexually impotent. Her marriage had not been consummated, and in fact she had never made love in her life. I had told Ann about my own condition, and the sense of relief in being able to do so was now strengthened by what she had told me about herself and her husband.

To explain this, I should say firstly that I had never been able to discuss my problem with anyone at all before. Part of the reason for Ann's growing commitment to me at that time was, I think, that she herself had hardly really discussed sexuality with anyone on any level despite the problems of her marriage, and she found it liberating to be able to talk about such problems with me. As for myself, I had previously thought of my impotence as a bitter personal secret, absolutely shameful and almost impossible to communicate or even hint at to anyone. All my earlier sexual attempts had turned out more or less catastrophic and humiliating, and I had become confirmed in my despair of ever being able to lead a normal life. I also had the feeling that most of my friends and relations knew of my secret and pitied me while pretending not to know. This was what made Ann's disclosure about her husband so important: the one person whom I had pictured most as a sexual rival was himself in the same predicament as I was. I no longer felt hopelessly unequal and doomed to lose out. I remembered Wilhelm Reich's dictum that virtually all men in a male-dominated capitalist society suffer from impotence of one kind or another (the inability to produce real sexual

fulfilment in your partner being one form). Ann's husband and I were just an illustration of this fact. All of us men pay a price for our sex's dominance over women, and impotence and sexual frustrations in their various internally and externally-imposed forms are this price.

* * * * *

A few weeks after this, Ann wrote me a beautiful poem. At least, *I* know it is beautiful: maybe some feminists and/or literary people would disagree. Certainly, Ann didn't polish the poem or intend it for anyone but ourselves — she just wrote what she felt. She felt angry, and the anger made a poem. She had never written a poem before and has never tried since. I feel pride when I re-read the tough, hard lines she wrote for me:

He kept saying how it was necessary
To suffer to become a Revolutionary
Can't the majority see what causes their misery?
It's capitalism and Catholicism and "democracy"
And Power in the hands of a rich minority.
What an awful reflection of a system
Which fucks up man and his family.

Well, my man has suffered enough
And I can't bear to see him so.
He's the perfect man to me,
in spirit and soul, yet ironically
If he had not suffered the riddles of years ago
He would not be a revolutionary,
nor my idol now.
I want to be the one to turn his hopes for real
But it will only be the Revolution
in which he will be fulfilled.
Long live the Revolution!
(For mankind, my man and me).

Ann wouldn't have used the same language today. She is far too uncompromising a feminist, and we have both got far beyond the stage of treating each other as idols. But the poem speaks for what we were then, and Ann Ann's thoughts still motivate me today. I want to be the one to realize Ann's hopes, just as she has already realized so many of mine. But to realize Ann's hopes will require more than anything I can do on my own — it will require a working class women's revolution as the heart of the socialist revolution itself. And it will need support from many men.

* * * * *

There may seem something faintly ludicrous about the way in which Labour Party politics intermingled with my relationship with Ann in 1973. Ann and I finally made love — to add the final touch — during the Labour Party Conference in Blackpool. Ann had done her best for me several times before, but always without success. I usually began with enough desire and emotion, but there was always fear in the background as well, and the fear invariably took over just at the crucial moment. This fear was always of the same crushing, irrational, self-generating kind, reminding me of my childhood nightmares. I always knew in advance that this fear would paralyse me, and so it always did. Since meeting Ann I had become more optimistic, but each time after I had failed her sexually I told myself not to hope any more. I felt again that I was doomed, although I still

held out the hope that perhaps the socialist revolution itself — when that great event finally took place — might conceivably save me! I hoped we wouldn't have to wait too long, although Ann promised she would stay with me in any case in the meantime.

The Labour Party Conference in October was a major event for the Chartists. About twenty or thirty of us used to go up each year, booking a whole guest house collectively, usually in Blackpool. This year, Ann had agreed to come, and I remember fetching her from her home and going with her to a pre-conference meeting in London the evening before we all left. Everyone's room number in Blackpool was read out at this meeting, and it was mentioned that Ann and I were to share a double bed. This was read out and acknowledged so naturally, and with such friendliness, that Ann and I just smiled, and I felt something happen to me. It was as if, for the first time, the public world at large had accepted me as a normal human being like everyone else. I am sure that it was this collective recognition which enabled me to respond to Ann at last. The pressure on me was off. I no longer felt that I *had* to make love — I no longer felt that "the world" would humiliate me if I didn't. Ann's own confidence in me had suffused the world around me, so that now even the Chartists (hard men!) seemed to be treating me as a human being! It seemed that this confidence was there to stay, regardless of whether I actually made love or not on a particular occasion. My fears were dissolved. I felt that if I didn't succeed with Ann for a while, it wouldn't matter — it was purely a matter between Ann and myself. However we acted towards each other, it would be alright.

With this in mind, I had even told myself that there was no need to try to make love on the first night in Blackpool. Even as we both got into bed in the guest house, tired out from having worked on the "Delegates' Briefing" until three or four in the morning, I still felt hardly worried, one way or the other. But I longed to be with Ann, to kiss her and hug her. We had hardly got into bed when the sleepy touch of Ann took over. Then the most miraculous event in my life occurred.

For the following week, Ann and I were in love so much that we hardly knew what was happening or who we were. We ate lovely Blackpool fish and chips, splashed our feet in the sea, went to the pictures and tried to concentrate on the conference as best we could. Blackpool's political conferences, its sand, its donkeys, its rude postcards, fat ladies, tramcars, fish and chips and laughing crowds of northerners still mean Ann, love and revolution to me now. And I can still remember Ann in our little bedroom the morning after that first night, frying eggs for breakfast with no clothes on at all, with me blinking and watching for all I was worth as I tried to get dressed, and she turning round and laughing, her eyes shining as they still do . . .

6.6.1979