



Monday, Aug. 21, 1972

Teenage Sex: Letting the Pendulum Swing

Girls can score just as many times as boys if they want to. I've gone to bed with nine boys in the past two years. It's a natural thing, a nice thing and a nice high. It sure can clear up the blues.

—Mimi, 18, a June graduate of Tenafly (N.J.) High School

I'm still a virgin. My friends last year blamed it on the fact that I was the youngest girl on campus. But I can't see having intercourse unless it's part of a tight emotional bond. My father has influenced me, but the fact that he is a minister has nothing to do with it. The church is not a stronghold against sex any more.

—Amanda, 16, a junior at Shimer College, Mount Carroll, Ill.

THEY could hardly be more unlike, Mimi and Amanda.*Yet both are representative of American teen-agers in 1972. Though Amandas predominate among the nation's boys and girls between 13 and 19, there are enough Mimis so that many parents are alarmed. Even some of the teen-agers themselves, especially those in college, are uneasy about their almost unlimited new sexual license. Along with a heady sense of freedom, it causes, they find, a sometimes unwelcome sense of pressure to take advantage of it. 'I'm starting to feel the same way about getting laid as I did about getting into college,' Dustin Hoffman confessed in *The Graduate*. A Columbia University psychiatrist reports that students come to him to find out what is wrong with them if they are not having intercourse. "My virginity was such a burden to me that I just went out to get rid of it," a junior at the University of Vermont revealed to a Boston sex counselor. "On a trip to Greece, I found any old Greek and did it so it wouldn't be an issue any more."

Was her trip necessary? Is there really a notable increase in teen-age sex? Foolproof statistics about sexual habits are hard to come by, but a recent survey prepared for the Nixon-appointed commission on population seems to offer reasonably reliable figures. Of 4,611 unmarried black and white girls living at home or in dormitories in 1971, more than 46% had lost their virginity by age 20, according to Johns Hopkins Demographers Melvin Zelnik and John Kantner (*TIME*, May 22). Comparison with previous generations is difficult because earlier studies are incomplete; Alfred Kinsey, for example, author of the first large-scale studies of sexual behavior, did not include blacks in his statistics. However, Kinsey's 1953 survey of some 5,600 white women disclosed that 3% were nonvirgins at age 15, and 23% had had premarital intercourse by the time they were 21. By contrast, Zelnik and Kantner report that of the 3,132 whites in their sample, 11% of the 15-year-olds were nonvirgins, and 40% of all the girls had lost their virginity by the age of 20. In short, youth's sexual revolution is not just franker talk and greater openness; more teenagers, and especially younger ones, are apparently having intercourse, at least occasionally.

Another indication of the reality of youthful sex is the rising incidence of VD, which has now reached epidemic proportions in high schools and colleges. After the ordinary cold, syphilis and gonorrhea are the most common infectious diseases among young people, outranking all cases of hepatitis, measles, mumps, scarlet fever, strep throat and tuberculosis put together. In 1970 there were at least 3,000 cases

of syphilis among the 27 million U.S. teen-agers and 150,000 cases of gonorrhea, more than in any European country except Sweden and Denmark. From 1960 to 1970 the number of reported VD cases among girls 15 to 19 increased 144%, and that percentage does not begin to tell the story, because it is estimated that three out of four cases go unreported.

The spiraling rate of pregnancies among unmarried girls is yet another indicator of sexual activity by the young. Per thousand teenagers, the number of illegitimate births has risen from 8.3 in 1940 to 19.8 in 1972. Of an estimated 1,500,000 abortions performed in the U.S. in 1971, it is believed that close to a third were performed on teenagers. Last year women at one prominent Eastern university had 100 illegitimate pregnancies, while at another there were almost 400—a rate of one for every 15 students. Nationwide the college pregnancy rate runs from 6% to 15%.

In Perspective. "Anything that discourages heterosexuality encourages homosexuality," says Paul Gebhard, executive director of the Kinsey Institute for Sex Research. Is the opposite also true? Some psychiatrists speculate that the new sexual freedom enjoyed by teen-agers may lead to a decrease in homosexuality. "Because there are fewer sexual taboos in our society today, the adolescent is more likely to find a heterosexual pathway," says Dr. Judd Marmor of Los Angeles. Yet only a small number of adolescents are likely to be affected, Marmor contends, since generally "the origins of homosexuality derive from certain specific conditions in the home, and these conditions still exist." There are no recent statistical studies that show changes in the incidence of homosexuality among teenagers. There are, however, some changes in attitudes. Just as there is a greater willingness to "come out of the closet" among their elders, younger men and women are more open about homosexuality, especially in cities and on campuses where there are organizations like the Gay Activist Alliance.

In heterosexual relationships, too, it is the teenagers' attitudes that have probably changed more than the statistics. The different sexual experiences of two sisters, eight years apart in age, illustrate at least some of the changes that are taking place.

Sue Franklin, now 25, had a traditional middle-class Midwestern upbringing. In 1965, when she was 18 and a college freshman, her sorority sisters talked about their sexual feelings only with extremely close friends, and nearly all gossiped about girls they suspected of having affairs. "Virginity was all important," Sue remembers. Then her boy friend of five years standing issued an ultimatum: "Either you go to bed with me or I'm leaving you." She gave in and was overcome with remorse. "My God," she thought, "what have I done? The more I learned about sex, the guiltier I felt, especially about enjoying it. I almost felt I had to deny myself any pleasure. My boy friend felt bad, too, because I was so hung up."

Sue's sister Pat, on the other hand, was just 15 and in high school when she first went to bed with a boy. Only one thing bothered her: fear of getting pregnant. She appealed to Sue, who helped her get contraceptive advice from a doctor. Since then, Pat has had one additional serious relationship that included sex. Observes Sue: "Pat had as healthy an attitude as could be imagined, as healthy as I wish mine could have been. She and her friends are more open. They're not blasé; they don't talk about sex as they would about what they're going to have for dinner. But when they do discuss it, there's no hemming and hawing around. And boys don't exploit them. With Pat and her boy friends, sex isn't a motivating factor. It's not like the pressure that builds when sex is denied or you feel guilty about it. It's kept in perspective, not something they're especially preoccupied with. They don't see sex as something you can do with everyone; they're not promiscuous."

Nor are most teenagers. Though the number of very youthful marriages appears to be declining, a fourth of all 18-and 19-year-old girls are married. More often than not, they had already had intercourse: more than half of them got married because they were pregnant. But on the whole, teen-agers actually are not very active sexually, in spite of the large number of nonvirgins.

Of those questioned by the Johns Hopkins demographic team, 40% had not had intercourse at all in the month before the survey, and of the remainder 70% had done so only once or twice that month. About 60% had never had more than one partner, and in half the cases that one was the man they planned to marry. When promiscuity was reported, it was more often among whites: 16% admitted to four or more partners, while only 11% of blacks had had that many.

Teen-agers generally are woefully ignorant about sex.

They may believe that "most teen-age boys can almost go crazy if they don't have intercourse," that "you can't get pregnant if he only comes one time," or that urination is impossible with a diaphragm in place. Other youths cherish the notion that withdrawal, douching, rhythm or luck will prevent conception. Overall, "the pervasiveness of risk taking" is appalling, Zelnik and Kantner discovered. More than 75% of the girls they interviewed said they used contraceptives only occasionally or never.

To close the information gap, schools and colleges have begun to provide telephone hot lines, new courses, manuals of instruction and personal counseling. By dialing 933-5505, University of North Carolina students can get confidential information about pregnancy, abortion, contraception, sexual and marital relationships. More than 30 trained volunteer counselors answer 50 calls a week, with at least one man and one woman always on duty so that shy callers can consult someone of their own sex. Complex questions are referred to a dozen experts, mostly physicians, who have offered their help.

Away from the campus, counseling is hard to come by, but contraceptive advice is usually available, at least to urban teenagers, from private social agencies and public health departments. This has not long been so. Birth Control Crusader Bill Baird was arrested in

1967 for giving out contraceptive devices to Boston University coeds. His conviction was overturned last March when the Supreme Court ruled that a state could not outlaw contraceptives for single people when they were legal for married couples. In most states the law is ambiguous about giving teenagers birth control advice, particularly without parental consent. But nowadays many authorities interpret the law liberally, believing that since teen-age sex is a fact, it ought at least to be protected sex. In any court test, they believe, the trend toward recognizing the civil rights of minors would prevail.

The policy of Planned Parenthood in New York City is typical. Before

1968 it gave birth control information to unmarried teen-age girls only if they already had had a child. Observes Executive Vice President Alfred Moran: "We were saying, in effect: 'We'll be glad to provide protection if you buy the ticket of admission—one pregnancy.'" Realizing the illogic of that position and swept along with the "new ethos," the organization now serves almost everyone and estimates that nearly 40% of its new patients are 19 or under.

At Manhattan's Margaret Sanger Research Bureau, clinic workers include teen-agers like Kathy Hull, 17, who gets course credits at her Brooklyn high school for volunteering. Chocolate cookies are passed around at the rap sessions that patients attend before they are examined and given contraceptives; boy friends are invited to the meetings and may even be present at the pelvic examinations if their girl friends agree. Said one who did: "He held my hand, and I was glad he cared enough to be there."

Dolls with Breasts. What brought about the new sexual freedom among teenagers? "Obviously," nine parents out of ten would probably say, "it's all this permissiveness." But permissiveness is just a word that stands for many things, and as with most societal changes, it is often difficult to tell what is cause and what is effect. One major factor is the "erotization of the social backdrop," as Sociologists John Gagnon and William Simon express it. American society is committed to sexuality, and even children's dolls have breasts and provocative outfits nowadays. Another frequently cited factor is the weakening of religious strictures on sex. Observes Social Critic Michael Harrington: "One of the great facts about our culture is the breakdown of organized religion and the disappearance of the inhibitions that religion

once placed around sexual relationships." Sociologists have found an inverse relationship between churchgoing and sexual experimentation: the less of the former, the more of the latter. In fact, suggests Sociologist Ira Reiss, today's teen-agers may have more influence on religion than the other way round. Among liberal clergymen, at least, there is something of a scramble to keep up with youthful ideas on sex. Permissive Catholic priests let their views become known and so in effect encourage liberated youngsters to seek them out for confession. Unitarian churches give courses for 12-to 14-year-olds "About Your Sexuality," complete with frank lectures and discussions, as well as films showing intercourse, masturbation and homosexuality.

Diminishing family influence has also shaken up the rules. The disillusionment of many youths with Viet Nam, pollution and corruption has sexual side effects, say Simon and Gagnon. It reinforces the idea of the older generation's moral inferiority. In fact, the two sociologists assert, many young people begin sexual activity in part as a "personal vendetta" against their parents. Nor does the older generation have a very good record of marital stability. Since there are now 357 divorces for every 1,000 marriages, it is little wonder that children do not necessarily heed their parents' advice or consider marriage their ultimate goal. "There's a healthy disrespect for the façade of respectability behind which Albee-like emotional torrents roll on," says Yale Chaplain William Sloane Coffin Jr.

Parents are not necessarily straightforward in their advice when they give it. Recalls Bob, a senior at the University of Pittsburgh: "When I was in high school, my father warned me about sex. It wasn't so much the moral part that bothered him; he was afraid I'd knock up a girl and have to get married and get a job. I think he knows I'm living with a girl now, but if it bothers him, he hasn't made any big deal about it. I guess he figures it will help keep me in college and away from someone who might have marriage in mind."

In the Sack. As with churches, some parents are following the lead of the children. One of these is a real estate executive in California, father of three sexually active teen-age girls. "I see sex being treated by young people more casually, yet with more respect and trust. This has had an effect on me and my wife," he asserts. In fact, he claims that it has transformed their 20-year marriage into "a damned exciting relationship." It has also led to a startling willingness to forgo privacy. One of the children recently asked her father at dinner: "Dad, how often do you masturbate?" And the children's mother confides: "Once in a while at breakfast Jim'll say, 'Gosh, we had a good time in the sack last night, didn't we?' " According to her, the girls "get a kick" out of this sort of confidence.

Many sensitive teen-agers find such "liberated" parents worse than old-fashioned ones. "In an attempt to be hip," says a recent Bard graduate, "parents and teachers can often rob an adolescent of his own private times, his first secret expressions of love. Overliberal parents can make a child self-conscious and sexually conscious before he is ready. Sex cannot be isolated from the other mysteries of adolescence, which each person must explore for himself."

Disillusioned as they may be with their elders, teen-agers owe much of their sexual freedom to parental affluence. More of them than ever before can now afford the privacy of living away from home, either while holding jobs or going to college. The proliferation of coed dorms has eased the problem of where to make love; though such dorms are not the scenes of the orgies that adults conjure up, neither are they cloisters. A phenomenon that seemed shocking when it first appeared in the West and Midwest in the 1960s, two-sex housing is now found on 80% of the coed campuses across the country. At some colleges, boys and girls are segregated in separate wings of the same buildings; at others they live on separate floors; at still others, in adjacent rooms on the same floor.

Some behavioral experts claim that in these close quarters, brother-sister relationships develop, so that a kind of incest taboo curbs sex. Moreover, Sarah Warren, a June graduate of Yale, suggests that "if you've seen the girls with dirty hair, there's less pressure to take their clothes off." But Arizona

Psychiatrist Donald Holmes insists that "where the sexual conjugation of man and woman is concerned, familiarity breeds consent." At a coed dorm at the University of Maryland recently, boys poured out of girls' rooms in droves when a fire alarm sounded in the middle of the night. At Bryn Mawr, one student explains: "When a boy and girl have been going together for a while, one of them drags his mattress into the other's room." A new kind of study problem has recently been brought to a college psychiatrist: what to do if your roommate's girl friend parades around your room nude. Ask her to get dressed? Or go elsewhere to study?

As for the Pill, nearly all laymen consider it a major cause of the new freedom, but a majority of professionals disagree. Because most girls dislike seeing themselves as on the lookout for sex, few go on the Pill until they are having intercourse regularly. Even then, because they are worried about its side effects, almost half choose other means, if indeed they use contraceptives at all. Just the same, Hartsdale, N.Y., Psychiatrist Laurence Loeb believes, the very existence of the Pill has important psychological effects because it means that pregnancy is avoidable.

Then why so many illegitimate births? A principal reason, say behavioral experts, is unconscious ambivalence about pregnancy—both wanting and not wanting it. According to Planned Parenthood, teen-agers may see pregnancy as a way of remaining childishly dependent on others or, conversely, as a step toward adulthood. Besides, adds Chicago Youth Counselor Merry Allen, "it's still a way to get married, if that's what you want."

According to popular opinion, the drug culture is yet another spur to sexual activity. "Once you've taken drugs and broken that rule, it is easier to break all the others," says a senior at the University of Pittsburgh. "Drugs and sexual exploration go hand in hand," insists Charlotte Richardson, a lay therapist in Atlanta. But many doctors doubt that drug use increases sexual experimentation (whether marijuana increases sexual pleasure is even a matter of some dispute). Stanford Psychiatrist Donald Lunde, among others, believes that drugs do not lead to sex but that depression causes many teen-agers to try both sex and drugs; each, he says, is a "temporary way of feeling good." Some kids actually use drugs to avoid sex. Says Daniel X. Freedman, University of Chicago professor of psychiatry and one of the most respected drug researchers: "You can't blame rising nonvirginity on drugs. A lot of adults do so, just as they blame pornography, when the real issue is how their children regulate themselves."

What about Women's Liberation?

During the '20s, the feminist drive for equal rights for women was partly responsible for an increase in premarital sex even greater than the present acceleration. Today's extreme militants, who believe that the new wave of permissiveness is a conspiracy to exploit them, want to put a damper on sex. But for the vast majority of women, the movement stands in part for a new freedom in sexual matters.

Over the past four years, Philip and Lorna Sarrel, sex counselors at Yale, have asked 10,000 students to fill out anonymous questionnaires on sexual knowledge and attitudes. Once it was easy to tell which answers came from males and which from females. No more. "At last, both young men and women are beginning to express their sexuality without regard to stereotypes," Sarrel declares with satisfaction. "We're getting rid of the idea that sex is something men do to women." As Jonathan Goodman, 17, of Newton High remarks, "I'd probably want to talk it over with a girl, rather than just let it happen. Her reasons for doing it or not doing it would be as important as mine."

Most observers think the equality movement has weakened, though not demolished, the double standard, and reduced, though not ended, male preoccupation with virility. There is somewhat less boasting about sexual conquest. Jonathan, for one, asserts that "I respect my girl friend and our relationship enough not to tell everyone what we're doing." Anyway, reports recent Columbia Graduate Lou Dolinar, "Now that girls are living with their boy friends in the dorm, it's pretty hard to sit around with them and talk like a stud. Male bull sessions of sexual braggadocio have been replaced by coed

bull sessions about sexual traumas."

Identity Crisis. Can teen sex be harmful, apart from causing such problems as illegitimate pregnancy and disease? Manhattan Psychoanalyst Peter Bios believes that the early adolescent, however physically developed, is psychologically a child and lacks the emotional maturity necessary to manage sexual relationships. If a child tries to grow up too fast, Bios says, he may never grow up at all. Says Catholic Author Sidney Cornelia Callahan: "Sexuality is very intimately related to your sense of self. It should not be taken too lightly. To become an individual, the adolescent has to master impulses, to be able to refuse as well as accept."

Even on campuses where sex is relaxed, says Sociologist Simon, "kids still experience losing their virginity as an identity crisis; a nonvirgin is something they did not expect to be." Sexually involved adolescents of all ages are sometimes beset by guilt feelings, though less often than were their elders. Admits Ellen Sims, a Tenafly girl of 15 who says she has turned celibate after sleeping with three boys when she was in the eighth grade: "I was ashamed of myself. Sometimes I wish I didn't even know what I've done." Similarly, University of Pittsburgh Junior Kathy Farnsworth confesses that "I know sex isn't dirty. It's fun. But I always have this nagging thing from my parents in my head. They'd kill me if they knew, and I've never been able to have an orgasm." Occasionally the pangs of old-fashioned conscience are so strong that a student drops out of school and requires months of therapy before he is able to resolve the conflict between his "liberated" behavior and the standards, acquired from his parents, that he still unconsciously accepts.

Experts also detect a frequent sense of shame and incompetence at not enjoying sex more. "A great many young people who come into the office these days are definitely doing it more and enjoying it less," says Psychiatrist Holmes. According to Simon and Gagnon, sexual puritanism has been replaced by sexual utopianism. "The kid who worries that he has debased himself is replaced by the kid who worries that he isn't making sex a spectacular event."

Infidelity creates additional problems, warns Columbia University Psychiatrist Joel Moskowitz. "A couple agree that each can go out with anyone. The girl says, 'So-and-so turns me on; I'm going to spend the night with him.' Despite the contract they've made, the boy is inevitably enraged, because he feels it's understood that such things hurt him." When the hurt is great enough to end the affair, the trauma for both may approach that of divorce, or worse. One college student asked his high school girl friend to live in his room with him, and then watched despairingly as she fell in love with his roommate, and, overcome with grief and confusion, tried to commit suicide.

Cool Sex. To lay and professional observers alike, one of the most distressing aspects of teen sex is its frequent shallowness, particularly when the participants are still in high school. At that stage, Simon and Gagnon report, it is often the least popular students who engage in sex—and who find, especially if they are girls, that their sexual behavior brings only a shady sort of popularity and more unhappiness. Wisconsin Psychiatrist Seymour Halleck ascribes a "bland, mechanistic quality" to some youthful relationships, and Beverly Hills Psychoanalyst Ralph Greenson observes that, "instant warmth and instant sex make for puny love, cool sex."

His words seem to fit the experience of Judy Wilson. Recalling the day she lost her virginity in her own bedroom at the age of 17, she says blithely: "One afternoon it just happened. Then we went downstairs and told my younger sister because we thought she'd be excited. We said, 'Guess what. We just made love.' And she said, 'Oh, wow. How was it?' And we said, 'Fine.' Then we went out on the roof and she took pictures of us."

But among more mature young people, shallowness is anything but the rule. "Our kids are actually retrieving sexuality from shallowness," insists Sex Counselor Mary Calderone. "They are moving away from the kind of trivialization we associated with the Harvard-Yale games in the '20s when the object

was to get drunk and lay a lot of girls." Los Angeles Gynecologist J. Robert Bragonier agrees: "Kids aren't looking for the perfect marriage, but they're idealistic about finding a loving relationship." Sarrel adds that he finds most student liaisons "more meaningful than the typical marriage in sharing, trusting and sexual responsibility."

Epitomizing this free but deep relationship is the experience of Yale Students Rachel Lieber and Jonathan Weltzer. Recently she wrote about it for a forthcoming book: "We had always assumed we'd marry eventually. We had lived together for two years and were growing closer . . . On our wedding night, Jonathan and I lay in bed, letting all the feelings well up around us and bathe our skins in warmth as the words we had said during the ceremony started coming back. We mixed our faces in each other's hair, and we looked at each other for a long time. So we spent our wedding night, not as virgins, but very close."

Informal liaisons often mature into marriage, and when they do, Yale's Coffin has found, many areas of the relationship are apt to be sounder than in less tested unions. This is especially true now that unmarried sex has largely lost its stigma. As Coffin explains, "The danger of premarital sex while it was verboten was that it covered up a multitude of gaps. A girl had to believe she was in love because, she told herself, she wouldn't otherwise go to bed. As a result, the real relationship never got fully explored."

Many psychiatrists have come to agree that the new openness has much to recommend it. One of these is Graham Blaine, until recently chief psychiatrist of the Harvard health services. In 1963, Blaine wrote that "college administrations should stand by the old morality" and decried relaxed dormitory rules that allowed girls to visit boys' rooms till 7 p.m. In 1971 he switched sides. "I have been convinced by the young that the new relationships are a noble experiment that should be allowed to run its course."

Today Blaine elaborates: "I thought we college psychiatrists would see a lot more emotional problems. I was wrong; most students are not being hurt. The pendulum should be allowed to swing." It will swing back—at least part way back—he predicts, as it did after the easygoing days of the English Restoration. "It's much more in keeping with human nature to make sex a private thing and to have some elements of exclusivity." Mrs. Callahan, speaking to student audiences, has found on campuses "a new puritanism or perhaps a lingering puritanism," and she usually gets a smiling response when she calls on her listeners to "join the chastity underground."

Yes or No. Whether or not the chastity underground is the wave of the future, as Mrs. Callahan hopes, some youths, at least, appear to be searching for firmer guidelines. "Sometimes I wish I were a Victorian lady with everything laid out clearly for me," admits Sarah Warren. Warns Coffin: "It's much easier to make authority your truth than truth your authority."

At Yale, the Sarrels, who had dropped a lecture on morals, were asked by the students to add one on sexual values and decisionmaking. But to search for guidelines is not necessarily to find them. Most of the proliferating courses, clinics and handbooks detail, meticulously, the biology of intercourse, contraception, pregnancy and abortion; few do more than suggest the emotional complexities of sex. For instance, *The Student Guide to Sex on Campus* (New American Library; \$1), written by Yale students with the help of the Sarrels, has this to say on the subject of "Intercourse—Deciding Yes or No":

"When a relationship is probably not permanent, but still very meaningful, it is more difficult to decide confidently ... There is so much freedom ... The decision is all yours, and can be very scary . . . No one should have intercourse just because they can't think of any reason not to. The first year in college can create confusion about sexual values. Your family seems very far away, and their ideas about almost everything are challenged by what you see and hear . . . Girls who have intercourse just to get rid of their virginity usually seem to find it not a pleasurable or fulfilling experience."

Sense of Trust. In personal counseling sessions, the Sarrels offer psychological support for students who would rather not rush things, telling them that "it's just as O.K. not to have sex as it is to have it." "People need to unfold sexually," Sarrel believes, and there is no way to speed the process. What is right may vary with a student's stage of emotional development. "A freshman may need to express rebellion and independence from his family and may use sex to do it." That is acceptable, Sarrel believes, as long as the student understands his motives: "We don't worry too much about the freshman who's going to bed with someone. We worry about the freshman who's just going to bed and thinks it's love." For an older student, intercourse may be right only if the lovers are intimate emotionally. How to judge? One crucial sign of intimacy is "a sense of trust and comfort. If you find you're not telling each other certain kinds of things, it's not a very trusting relationship."

Apparently this kind of advice is what the students want. Sarrel has been dubbed "the Charlie Reich of sex counseling" by an irreverent observer, and like the author of *The Greening of America*, he is very popular: 300 men and women crowd into his weekly lectures at Yale, and more than 1,000 other colleges have asked for outlines of his course. For good reason. The Sarrels' careful counseling has cut the VD and unwanted pregnancy rate at Yale to nearly zero.

But what about ethical questions?

For those who are not guided by their families or their religion, Sarrel's system—and the whole body of "situation ethics"—fails to offer much support for making a decision. Years ago William Butler Yeats wrote a poem about the problem:

I whispered, "I am too young."

And then, "I am old enough"; Wherefore I threw a penny To find out if I might love.

How did the toss come out? Yeats, unsurprisingly, gave himself a clear go-ahead, ending his poem:

Ah penny, brown penny, brown

penny, One cannot begin it too soon.

Nowadays a great many adolescents, like Yeats, seem to be simply tossing a coin, and singing the same refrain.

*The names of the children and their parents in this story are fictitious.