

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

The not-so-secret lives of teenagers

By Ella Piper Claffy

Writer's note:

As any high school student will tell you, the term "hookup" is a nebulous term. Although it refers mostly to kissing, in casual conversation and this article it designates a no-strings-attached encounter.

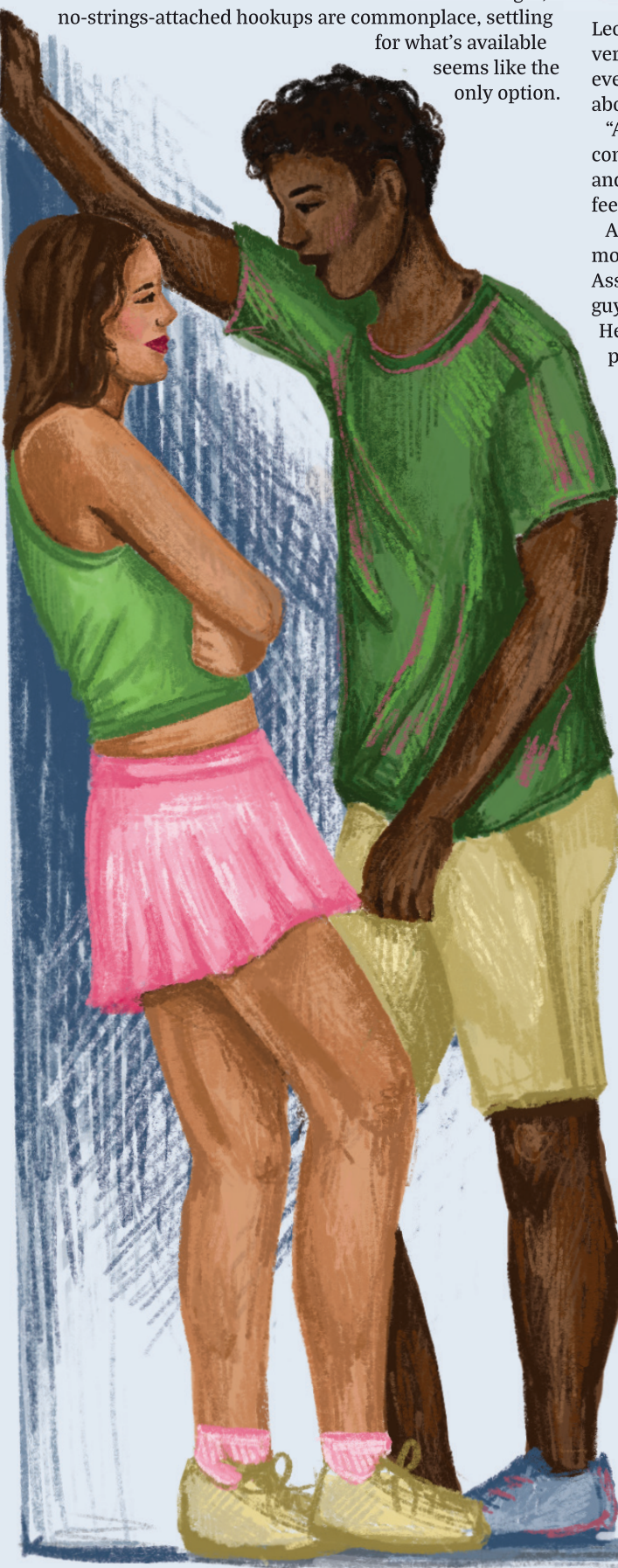
This subject has been on my mind for a while this year. A few months ago, after listening to one too many rants about the unfulfilling state of affairs in our grade, I decided to do something more purposeful. The goal in compiling these stories is to give us something to contemplate. There is no right or wrong way to go about high school relationships, but I hope that with an article that relies more on substance than sensationalism, we can start to be intentional in pursuing what we want.

Hanna's first kiss lasted 15 minutes, in the bathroom of a packed house, with a guy she had "probably spoken ten words to beforehand."

The junior's experience was not like the movies – there were no fireworks.

"For basically my whole life, I would have said that your first kiss should be a momentous occasion," said Hanna, not her real name. But when a boy in her grade asked if she was interested, "it was barely even a question for me – I didn't know when the chance for my first kiss would come around again."

Hanna's story epitomizes an anxiety shared by many girls: that their first kiss, and anything it may lead to, will be devoid of romance. But in an environment where one-night, no-strings-attached hookups are commonplace, settling for what's available seems like the only option.



Leonidas Iliopoulos abhors hookup culture, or at least the version of it he has encountered at St. John's. For a topic that everyone seems so fixated upon, he says that we are going about it all wrong.

"A hookup should be based on more than just a physical connection," Iliopoulos said. "There should be chemistry – and conversation – and if you do it right, maybe you have feelings for each other at some point in the night."

A recent addition to the St. John's community, Iliopoulos moved from Slovakia only seven months ago as a part of the Assist Exchange program. Back in Bratislava, he was a social guy, yet he considers the SJS party scene a bit of a letdown. He feels like he is in an environment that actively tries to prevent him from having a good time.

In August, Iliopoulos attended his first American house party with his new junior classmates. The host had a pool, so he decided to go for an impromptu swim, even though he was without proper swim attire.

"I jumped in the pool, and suddenly everyone was so worried about the fact that I was in my underwear," Iliopoulos said. "Why does it matter so much?"

Iliopoulos admits a predisposition to going against the flow, but he feels like his American schoolmates are so concerned with having fun the so-called "right way" that they end up not having any fun at all. Especially when it comes to getting together, Iliopoulos has noticed that people are overly wrapped up in following a specific protocol: "guy walks up to girl, they say five sentences to each other, and then they go to his car."

This prescribed view of pseudo-romance ends up limiting both the number and emotional depth of these entanglements, according to Iliopoulos.

Iliopoulos articulates a common grievance with SJS parties – they are kind of boring. "People will always find something to complain about," Iliopoulos said.

This view is shared by ninth-grade students like Stephanie, who attributes this lackluster party scene to a hyperfocus on hookups.

"Freshman parties are practically segregated by gender," said Stephanie, not her real name. "If someone crosses that barrier, everyone assumes they are going to hook up – and suddenly that's all anyone can talk about."

A MOST DANGEROUS GAME OF TELEPHONE

The fact is at parties, or anywhere else for that matter, hookups dominate conversation. Because students are generally focused on their academic workload, and

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traditional relationships in most grades are few and far between, talking about hookups provides a much-needed break from the monotony of academics. For many, gossiping about who did what with whom serves as a dependable conversation starter, a way for people to examine the social scene without having to speak about themselves.

"I love to gossip," said Brynn, not her name. "It's a way that I can be funny, or be interesting, or show that I'm in the know – but I'm also not really risking anything."

Most gossip is ineffectual, and since hookups generally happen within the same social groups in every grade, they ultimately lose their shock value. But every once in a while, there is one that gets everybody's attention.

Such was the case with Hanna.

When she returned to school on Monday after having her first kiss on Saturday night, Hanna said, "It seemed like everyone wanted to talk to me about it. People I didn't really know, wasn't friends with – they all wanted to know all about how it was and how I was feeling."

That week Hanna revealed in the newfound attention, answering dozens of barely distinguishable questions from other girls: How was it? Was it your first? Do you like him?

Are you going to the party this weekend? Is it going to happen again?

That Monday marked the beginning of Hanna's era of notoriety. While privately regretting the underwhelming nature of her first kiss, she was nonetheless excited by the prospect of future invites to parties and garnering more attention around school.

Junior Ria Pawar says that hookups lend an air of intrigue to someone you might not otherwise know – but it is easy to overdo it.

"There's a pressure in our grade that if people don't have hookups, it's assumed that they're boring or can't get play," Pawar said. "Once they do hook up with someone, everyone will say they're doing too much."

Hank, a junior who asked to remain anonymous, adds that people will be quicker to jump to conclusions about girls who engage in hookups.

Such double standards can wrap up participants in a world that seems appealing but is complicated by classmates who will make assumptions about one's character.

Stephanie, for example, is acutely aware that she has been talked about behind her back, and she has spent the past few months coming to terms with the way people now perceive her.

"I hooked up with one guy, and all of a sudden everyone had these preconceived notions about me," she said. "People who don't know anything about me, have never spoken to me, can claim some sort of insider information." Whenever Stephanie finds herself walking past the athletic team of the

boy she hooked up with, they start to laugh or cheer. That kind of attention she can handle, but months later, when she heard from her friends that people at another school said he had sexually assaulted her, she realized the perils of an over-publicized encounter.

"That kind of game of telephone gets really dangerous, really fast," Stephanie said.

Upper School Counselor Ashley Le Grange is happy that people are talking about hookups, but she thinks they should focus conversations on their comfort level with hookup culture as opposed to gossiping about what others have done.

"A lot of times hypothetical conversations about one's own potential experiences with hookups get branded as shallow or self-absorbed," Le Grange said. "But it's so important to do the self-examination ahead of time and know whether you can handle not getting emotionally attached."

THE VALIDATION OF BEING WANTED

Things started to get complicated for Hanna as soon as feelings were introduced into the equation – not just for her, but for everyone else tuning in and talking about her situation.

A week after her first kiss, Hanna found something unexpected attached to the hookups: strings. She kept hearing that the guy she had gotten with had real feelings for her. She did not reciprocate.

When people found out that Hanna wasn't interested in taking the next step, they got upset. The buzz surrounding her hookup turned toxic.

"People felt like I violated the unspoken expectation that girls should automatically go along with what the guy wants," she said. "And when it seemed like I had messed with his feelings, they didn't like that."

Stephanie adds that her ninth-grade peers are far more likely to spring into action to defend a girl's feelings than to defend a girl's.

"It's assumed that girls are going to catch feelings," Stephanie said, adding that few will condemn a boy who has given a girl false hope regarding a

potential longer-term relationship. "But every once in a while a guy feels like he's been led on, and people just get so pressed."

Hanna and Stephanie attribute this reaction to the assumed rarity of guys who would be willing to emotionally commit.

Juniors Kieran Coffey, Zain Haq and their friend who asked to remain anonymous were interviewed together, and they estimated that half their friends would prefer to be in a relationship. Yet the narrative of hookup culture is so pervasive that many guys "haven't even thought about" looking past just one night, Coffey said.

According to anonymous friend Anthony, most guys are going to a party with the mindset, "Oh, I want to hook up with a girl tonight," as opposed to thinking, "I want

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to start a meaningful conversation with a girl and figure out if I want to date her."

As someone in a long-term relationship, Coffey says he finds fault with the superficial system that is hookup culture.

Instead, Coffey recommends a "talking stage." He says a physical connection that starts with emotion will be more rewarding than one based solely on attraction.

Anthony thinks most of his friends have yet to experience the kind of connection that would motivate them to take themselves "off the market." So, like many others, they find themselves content for the time being with hookups.

Months later, Hanna is still single. A combination of no immediate prospects and no time has prevented her from pursuing a boyfriend. She says that, with the classes she takes and her extracurricular commitments, it wouldn't be feasible to maintain a romantic relationship.

"I'm not interested in the highs and lows of high school football," she said. "And I don't have the energy on a daily basis to pretend that I am."

Hanna admits that her last experience also scared her away from relationships. She has seen what life under a microscope is like, and she's not eager to experience that again.

"The people who had been so excited for me when I had that first hookup were the same ones who had turned around and talked badly about me behind my back," she said.

Although the focus on Hanna soon faded, the impressions that people had about her stuck. And these perceptions infiltrated her friendships and left her feeling isolated and undesirable.

Stephanie agrees there's a

mental toll that accompanies hookups.

"At a certain point, when you know everyone is labeling you a certain way, it's hard not to look at yourself through that same lens," Stephanie said.

Ria Pawar attempts to balance the positive and negative emotional effects of getting with people. Her personal preference is that a guy approaches her, and she thinks most girls steer away from initiating potential hookups because it detracts from that validation of being wanted. Hank says that, as a guy, it's comforting when a girl says yes to a hookup after he has stuck his neck out to propose it. Pawar explains that girls just like to be asked.

"There are so many girls in our grade who hook up with guys just to feel accepted," said a junior girl who asked to remain anonymous.

Stephanie thinks of herself as a relationship person, but she accepts a less permanent arrangement.

"I'm absolutely settling," Stephanie said. "But I don't want to miss out on these experiences, so I take what I can get."

Yet even with limited options, there are those who refuse to buy into hookup culture. Brynn is saving her first kiss until she finds the right guy.

"I don't want to feel used – I want to feel wanted," she said. "And the thing is, nobody's going to care if it's your first time if it's not theirs."

These days, Hanna is open to some low-stakes fun if the opportunity for a hookup presents itself. But she hopes that someday soon she'll get to feel those fireworks.

"If you asked me now, I would tell you that a first kiss doesn't really matter," Hanna said. "At least that's what I've had to convince myself.

Additional reporting by Georgia Andrews



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