

A SEXUAL LIFE

How the first molecule reproduced itself is the ultimate mystery. However, according to Arthur Guiterman, the answer is simple if you're a one-cell organism:

Amoebas at the start
were not complex;
they tore themselves apart
and started sex.

When it came to man, the Greeks believed that a jealous god divided the sexes and dared them to find their better halves before they became infertile. Consequently, man spends nine months struggling to find a way out of the womb and the rest of his life in search of another. His role model appears to be the male green flatworm who permanently resides inside the female. The consequence of these human efforts to return to the womb is "a world shrunken to a heap of hot flesh straining on a bed" in the unromantic view of classical scholar E.R. Dodds. The Hebrews, who suffered from the same epidemic of "mild apoplexy" as Dodds' Greeks, had another idea about reproduction. Six thousand years before the Manhattan Project, Jehovah just "split the Adam."

Today some claim that the only way to tell the sexes apart is with a court order. One anonymous father explained the difference between men and women to his son by saying, "A boy goes with his father to the honeymoon suite, but he goes home with his mother." Another difference many have observed is that while women commonly laugh at male strip shows, men sit glumly trying to stare holes through the women they're ogling. My wife learned this basic difference the hard way while I was attending a summer seminar several years ago. She doused a birthday card with some cheap perfume as a joke and sent it to a single, male friend of ours. The friend, knowing I was out of town, put on a suit, drove three hundred miles, and showed up on our doorstep with a dozen roses expecting my wife to greet him in a negligee. She quickly disabused him of that expectation, sending him back down the Interstate, detumescent. It seems that men need to believe that every woman who mails a jesting card or casts a furtive glance their way is signaling sexual availability. In one study, 75% of the men who were asked by a woman in a bar if they would like to go to bed with her said yes. When a man asked several women the same question, not one woman answered affirmatively. Apparently Mae West, who limited her preference to "foreign and domestic men," was not among the women asked.

Regardless of the sex, however, childhood is a period of intense sexual curiosity. It is also a time when sexual myth and ignorance wax luxuriously. One of the myths of my childhood had to do with saltpeter, a substance, I was told, that had the same shriveling effect on a boy's whizzer as salt has on a slug. It was rumored that saltpeter "cured" a boy's overactive libido and left him sexless as a pig's thigh in the smoke house. One summer at Boy Scout camp, word escaped from the mess hall that the dreaded chemical was in the eggs. Though I was not especially fond of those single-serving boxes of dry cereal, I ate the stuff secure in the knowledge that I was foiling an adult plot to neuter my generation.

Given the sad state of sex education, no one should be ashamed of believing the whispered tales of youth. Da Vinci believed that erections were fed by air from the lungs,

and Balzac once feared that a nocturnal emission cost him a novel. Untold thousands have believed that European feudal lords had the right to deflower any virgin in their bailiwick, and history teachers are often asked (after class as a rule) if Catherine the Great really died horsing around with a stallion. Aristotle tried to convince women that if they conceived in a north wind they'd have a boy. If they wished for a girl, they had to wait for the wind to blow from the south. Hippocrates disagreed and advised men to tie a string tightly around the right testicle to produce a boy, and vice versa for a girl. In the mid 90s, I recall a doctor friend of mine laughing as he told me of a patient who used an orange-peel diaphragm and douched with Classic Coke. I laughed right along with him at the time, but a Harvard study published in the late 60s proved that Classic Coke killed 91% of the sperm it contacted, and Diet Coke was fully 100% effective, though not recommended for anything but drinking by the manufacturer.

Given "experts" who advise eating Graham crackers to curb lust and others who judge a person's sex drive by the sensitivity of the "funny bone," who can blame some poor guy in Anchorage who thinks that dried, ground flies from Spain will heat a frigid wife? The fact is:

Neither Spanish fly
nor Beefeater gin
works like the prospect
of Jesus' foreskin.

Of course, I didn't know that when I was fifteen. Though I had heard of Spanish fly, I had no idea where to find any. My father had bourbon in his liquor cabinet and three kids to his credit, so I figured Ogden Nash knew what he was talking about:

Candy
is dandy,
but liquor
is quicker.

The first opportunity I got to ply a woman with alcohol, I passed out before she did and awoke with acute crapulence. But I was a wiser man then knowing that one in the hand is often better than two in the bush, especially these days when no one can know what's in the bushes with you.

Indeed, lowering the age of puberty to twelve and raising the average age of marriage to twenty-five surely has increased the number of people who have decided to take matters into their own hands, for masturbation means safe sex in the age of AIDS. But today's nostrum was yesterday's plague. Indeed, the Roman Catholic Church once refused to permit masturbation even to obtain a semen specimen for the detection and cure of gonorrhea. Hilaire Belloc summarized the pre-AIDS attitude toward masturbation as follows:

The world is full of double beds
And such delightful maidenheads
That there is simply no excuse

For sodomy and self-abuse.

Though Mark Twain called masturbation “a majestic diversion,” it was not until the sexual revolution of the 1960s that one read whole-hearted endorsements of the practice such as the following, which appeared in *Cosmopolitan* in 1971: “Masturbation...is wholesome, normal, and sound. You are training your body to become a superb instrument of love. Masturbate to your heart’s content.” Perhaps an answer to the masturbation debate is the “Argonaut solution.” If man had a detachable penis like the Argonaut octopus, the Church could lock it up in a Vatican vault until the proper time when it could be checked out like a book on reserve, an hour at a time with heavy fines for tardy returns or abuse. Alas, the ambulatory dildo remains a pipe dream of the Church.

Chastity, in fact, may be more lonely and self-abusive than masturbation. I recall one of my high school English teachers reading Herrick’s title “To the Virgins,” then pausing for a pregnant moment and bitterly saying, “Thanks for nothing!” Indeed my adolescence was a period of great sexual conflict. In my presence, my mother would ask my sisters, even when they were still “carpenter’s dreams,” flat as boards, “Who *buys* a cow if the milk is free?” At the same time, the chaplain, who was preparing me for confirmation, was quoting St. Augustine, who before being led off to the monastery, said, “Make me chaste and continent, Lord, but not just yet.” The chaplain said this partly in jest, being a hip, married Protestant, but, indeed, the idea that “virtue is an intact hymen” has been the moral advice of the church for centuries. Though the automobile and the birth-control pill seriously wounded chastity, hymen-reconstruction surgery or “revirginization” remains popular in some parts of the world, and in this country about one-fifth of adults say they never have sex and never will. Though the National Chastity Association (NCA) might like to distribute chastity belts and restore the old Austrian Chastity Police to power, the ideal for most Americans these days appears to be, in the words of E.M. Forster, “Less chastity and more delicacy.” Indelicate case in point, most of the chastity belts sold today are bought by bondage freaks, not jealous husbands.

Despite the NCA, all of us feel the urge at some point to fly upside down like a barn swallow trying to attract a mate and wing our DNA into the future. But in the age of AIDS, men are urged to “wrap that rascal,” and to “vulcanize before you spread her thighs.” Men in turn complain that wearing a condom is “like showering in a raincoat,” or “smelling a rose through a gas mask.” Thirty years ago, an Army buddy of mine decided to “seek the middle ground” in this debate; he wore his ribbed condoms inside out so that his partner didn’t receive all the enjoyment. The government of Uganda, however, has apparently given up looking for the middle ground and decided that collective suicide is the best contraceptive of all. In September of 1991, the Ugandan Minister of Information issued a directive to state-supported media ordering them to stop announcements concerning condoms and their role in curbing AIDS. Uganda, incidentally, remains one of the African states worst afflicted by the AIDS pandemic.

I attribute the Ugandan announcement to a resurgence of Victorian colonial prudery, which among other things denied the existence of lesbianism, concluded that foreplay was centered in the neck, and assured women that the female orgasm was a disease. Such excessive propriety is the sort of thing that led CBS in 1955 to change Cole Porter’s phrase “four-letter words” to “three-letter words” (to avoid that four-letter word *sex*, I suppose).

We shouldn't feel too smugly superior today, however, for 9% of Americans do not think menstruation is a subject that should be taught in all-girl, sex-education classes.

For a year while my father was studying at New York University, I attended a straight-laced school in Brooklyn which was 99% Catholic. One Wednesday afternoon when everyone except me was excused for religious training, I tagged along playing hooky from study hall and overheard a nun telling some small girls to avoid patent-leather shoes on sunny days lest a reflection of their panties be seen on their shoe tops. That fear, I suppose, accounts for nuns' long, black habits and their sensible shoes. C.P. Sawyer also found the whole business of prudery laughable. Tongue in cheek, he wrote:

I used to love my garden,
But now my love is dead,
For I found a bachelor's button
In black-eyed Susan's bed.

Alex Comfort, author of *The Joy of Sex* and the last man to worry whether Susan was married, advised, "If you're going to take off your clothes, take off your shell too." But a lot of us, like the shy fellow who placed his foot in the john and peed down his leg so not to offend his wife, have a permanent carapace.

For all the well-intentioned warnings from the Church, such as the nun's above, British social critic Malcolm Muggeridge claimed that "the orgasm has replaced the Cross as the focus of longing and the image of fulfillment." But no Hindu has ever hidden the fact that Krishna seduced 16,000 virgins in a night. And in at least one Hindu sect, sex is virtually worshiped in the form of a stone phallus which is set inside a circular base called a yoni. At the annual Feast of Siva's Marriage, a Hindu priest ceremoniously smears the lingam and yoni with clarified butter and then washes them with milk. Muslims, on the other hand, are about as squeamish when it comes to sex as Christians. The Ayatollah Khomeini once urged men to hold their penises with only two fingers when urinating, and for Allah's sake, not to urinate in the direction of Mecca.

The early Christian church, in fact, labored sedulously to transform sex into sin. With the scalpel of logic firmly in hand, church fathers in the fifth century declared that since sperm and urine issue from the same organ, priests should be celibate. Recommendations for the laity were almost as stringent. According to some medieval church fathers, intercourse should be abstained from on Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays, and Mondays in honor of Christ's arrest, his crucifixion, his mother, his resurrection, and the dead, respectively. That left Tuesdays and Wednesdays, but about half of those days over a year were excluded because of fasts and church festivals. Consequently, "emergent occasions," as intercourse was euphemistically called, was rare indeed. It would not be until the Enlightenment that men were as comfortable with sex as William Byrd of colonial Virginia, who could "roger" his wife or the maid and then relax with a "sermon in Tiltonson" before bed. Today's ethos is perhaps best captured by Mae West's famous line, "To err is human, but it feels divine."

That is until you exceed your limits, because promiscuous sex is, I imagine, something like being tickled to the point of pain. My older sister was once propositioned by the unwilling Wilt Chamberlain as she waited for a train in San Francisco. Despite her rejection,

Wilt with 20,000 conquests under his belt looked happy enough, but Don Juan's diaries after a mere one thousand sexual victories tell a story of bitterness and disillusionment, of compulsively plotting pathways of ascent even as he panted in decline. The promiscuous among us "hear America swinging," but their heads are caught in their zippers, and sex on the brain, as Malcolm Muggeridge reminds us, is a very unsatisfactory place to have it.

In the late 70s an Army buddy of mine and his wife paid a visit to Plato's Retreat in New York City, where despite the name, all the love was not above the neck. After four hours in the "mat room" with a half dozen unwashed strangers, my friend longed to escape from a man everyone called "the human tripod" and a woman who had "sweet thang" tattooed in her pubic hairs. After swimming, dancing, drinking, and playing pool in the buff, all he wanted was his pants, his wife, and a way out. Malcolm Bradbury wrote that, "If God had wanted us to have group sex, He'd have given us more organs." Voltaire, I suspect, would have agreed. After an orgy, Voltaire was asked if he would like to attend another. "Once is a philosopher," the author said. "Twice is a pervert."

On April 9, 1984, the orgies ended when *Time* announced that due to herpes (which until the late 70s was often diagnosed as psoriasis) and an uncertain economy, the sexual revolution was over. For all its virtues, democracy when applied to love and sex is a vice. For despite Erica Jong's rhapsodic defense, there are no "zipless fucks" or "Teflon liaisons." As Harry Stein, the former *Esquire* ethicist wrote:

It's impossible to compartmentalize our lives, to keep a single aspect of our existence under lock and key yet be blissfully open about the rest.... When it comes to infidelity [even in a mat room with your spouse present] we have seven millennia of human history to draw upon, and the evidence appears conclusive: duplicity no matter how it's dressed up generally makes everyone feel rotten.

My Army friend and his wife split up, in fact, long before the revolution ended.

The fantastic women who, in Yeats' words, "offer to love's play [their] dark declivities," exist mostly in the dank air between men's ears. The Duchess of Marlborough, however, may have been an exception. She wrote in her diary, "The Duke returned from the wars today and did pleasure me in his top boots." And dozens of British women did give a bare-breasted greeting on the Southampton docks to their men returning from the Falklands War. But the Duchess and the British "war widows" were offering their declivities, as it were, to one man only, not the regiment or the fleet. The rule is that men want women more than women want men, most of whom are as discriminating as pollen in a gale. In their defiance of the natural law, men in their desperation remind me of the mule:

A sterile member
hasn't stopped the mule
from seeking exceptions
to hard-fast rules.

One of the exceptions is Lucille's Clifton's magical woman who puts a spell on a man and spins him like a helicopter blade on her loins. Another is the woman whose smile

draws the purse strings of a man's scrotum tight and whose tongue can tie wet noodles in knots. Male-oriented fiction is filled with women like these, but the non-fiction woman is far different. Yes, according to Gershon Legman's computations, there are about fourteen million sexual positions, but each one makes another unwanted pregnancy possible in a country where 15% are illegitimate and adolescent mothers without husbands are the core of the poverty problem. Yes, humans have some two hundred sex-related thoughts each day, but an orgasm burns only 150 calories (a beer's worth), and the sexual organs are really only modified mucus membranes and sweat glands. Few of us, however, and that includes physicians, think of the genitals in such clinical terms.

Especially among married couples, the reality of sex may vary from the Victorian woman who closed her eyes, opened her legs, and thought of England, to the wife of a Klansman who claimed her husband was a "wizard between the sheets." It ranges from one couple whose idea of sexual compatibility is a night when both have headaches, to a couple who warms up watching home videos of themselves in heat oblivious to ringing doorbells and telephones. It ranges from Rodney Dangerfield, who would have no sex if not for pickpockets, to the wife of a former colleague who regards herself as the "priestess of the fuzzy oracle." The ideal, however, exists somewhere between these real limits.

The ideal, however, is faceted, not smooth. One facet as someone put it is "not the length of the ship, but the courtesy to stay in port until all have gotten off." Another facet is the knowledge that unless pleasure is mutual, it's no fun for either. The ideal is not a divine mandate to populate the wilderness; instead, it's a responsibility to bring into the world no more children than you can provide for and love. The ideal is a flexible cultural notion that once permitted Chinese men to think kissing a three-inch bound foot was the pinnacle of eroticism. And it is the knowledge that sex is not a male or heterosexual need, but a universal human right. To achieve the ideal:

Espalier desire
well before the show—
left wild or cut back
means nothing can grow.

Only when there is a domestic florescence can the "earth move" for all and, as Lear said, "copulation thrive."

But with age, the ideal is increasingly difficult to attain. The stereotype of the aging Lothario is a man with a closed mind and an open fly, open either because he's a horny old goat or because he forgets to close it. The male reality is:

After a while
he may start to wheeze,
but the antique rat
still loves the cheese.

The female reality is a woman organist with many good tunes left in her pipes.

Once a rake, however, always a rake, for old habits are slow to die. Just before Hugh Hefner retired from his position with *Playboy*, but while he still had the run of the *Playboy*

Mansion with all its attendant voyeuristic opportunities, he is reported to have walked the streets of Chicago past midnight hoping to see a woman undressing before an open window. It's true that once-supple limbs turn stiff with age, and limbs that once were stiff turn disconsolately limp, but humans rust out, as Franklin said, faster than they wear out. And while love does tarnish with age, so does sterling silver, but that doesn't diminish its value. It may even enhance it, for a fine patina has a luster all its own.

While frigidity is sometimes a problem in a woman's post-menopausal years, the bane of aging males is impotence. Cary Grant denied it was a problem at all. His advice to men was to confess it up front, for "no woman can wait to disprove it." A few years ago after my wife had a mastectomy, I found that when the major appeared it was hard for my soldier to come to attention. In despair I wrote:

The surgeon who cut
Jill's cancerous breast
also cut Jack but
there's no scar on his chest.

I felt myself to be "incompetent," but I wasn't laughing at the word play. I wrote to my closest friend:

My only hope
for another erection
is *rigor mortis*
or the Resurrection.

He replied advising me to see if my problem was psychological or physiological. To this end he said to wrap my penis before going to bed with a ring of one-cent stamps. In the morning if the perforations were torn, my problem was psychological and just to give myself some time.

Through all of this, my wife has been enormously understanding and sympathetic. She reminded me of something we both had noticed years ago in London's White Chapel Tower. Henry the Eighth, who left six wives unhappy, had the largest codpiece in the armor collection. Her story helped me to recall that while Anne Boleyn, Henry's second wife, had an extra nipple ("a witch's teat"), she gladly would have traded it for her head on the executioner's scaffold.

The connection between sex and death has long been recognized. The French are fond of noting that man, unlike the crowing rooster, grieves after sex, for an orgasm is a "little death," and a drop of semen is equivalent to a drop of blood. Zoologists and botanists also have noted the phenomenon called semelparity, or procreation after a lifetime of preparation. This, I imagine, is the ultimate sex, explosively ecstatic even as it is self-destructive. Examples of semelparity include the Pacific salmon, which after as long as nine years at sea, spawn a few days before their death. And some bamboos briefly flower after 120 years of preparation and then perish. It's as if a celibate priest ejaculated seventy years worth of semen and fell dead in his coffin-bed. Theologians, on the other hand, like to remind us that life is a loan and ultimately we owe God a death for all the pleasures we

have enjoyed. Personally, I wish there were some other currency acceptable in the settlement of this debt. Lily Tomlin likes to reassure her audiences that “there is sex after death. We just won’t be able to feel it.” Lauren Bacall’s tender gesture was more comforting. At Humphrey Bogart’s funeral, she placed in her old friend’s coffin a gold whistle that was engraved, “If you need anything just whistle.” I shudder to think, however, that Bogart ever used the thing.

In the Army, I recall that one favorite bull-session topic was whether a man, who ejaculates when hanged, feels it. Thirty years later, I still do not know if dead men whistle or what the dying feel, but I feel certain that the whip-tail lizard, which reproduces without sex, does not have the answer either. I’m satisfied that death is a successful return to the earthen womb from which humans departed a lifetime ago and where they lie awaiting the spring.

A GRAMMARIAN CONSIDERS THE DEITY

OK, so it’s decided—
 God’s a verb, not a noun,
 but is It active or passive?
 Did It make the light,
 or was the light made by It?

Gerund, participle, or infinitive?
 Is It damning or to damn?

Transitive or intransitive?
 Does Its blessing cross Its verb?

Indicative, imperative, or subjunctive?
 Does it act as a tour guide,
 despot, or hypothesis?

Progressive or emphatic?
 Is It watching or does It watch?

Past, present, or future?
 Was It, or is It still to be?