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Mating Dance

After ten years of marriage and a good while since dallying in the nightclub scene, my husband and I, quite by accident and with no intentions, stopped at the newest Omaha hot spot. I suppose we wanted to see what we had been missing. *Stir* was advertised widely as a dance club/nightclub/singles bar, in the vein of the famous *Studio 54*. Since I was old enough to actually remember the seventies, I felt quite at home. As we entered, the club was dimly lit with a long bar across the front where the dance floor ran, complete with choreographed bartender who never spilled a drop of alcohol as he threw a fifth of rum over his shoulder, behind his back, and up again to the deafening beat of seventies disco music.

We found a table across the room and away from the crowd. Beside our table and leopard-print chairs was a round platform, three feet high and about as wide, inside which a neon light pulsated to the beat of Donna Summer's "Hot Stuff." The dance floor quickly filled with gyrating twenty-to-thirty-somethings. The crowd was 70% female: young women with ultra-mini skirts and bare midriffs, rubbing and caressing each other as they moved in sync with the music. I explained to my husband this was the trend; young women dance, fondle and sometimes are publicly affectionate with other women, even though they eventually pair off with men. Maybe it was simply a test, I speculated, dipping a toe into the waters of sexual experimentation.

We soon realized the platform beside our table was an individual stage for dancers. One by one, the young women took turns climbing onto the small, glowing spotlight to perform. The girls were less than

twenty-four inches from our seats. Our vantage point, beside and just below, gave us an intimate view of their panties. I tried to be considerate and watch something—anything—else, but my husband had no such qualms. As I looked around the nightclub, other couples that sat by a dance podium were having the same experience: men looking up, women looking away, shaking their heads.

After several annoyed requests to avert his gaze, my husband confessed he could not *not* look. It was just not genetically possible, he said. As a male animal, he had an inherent compulsion to do stupid things, one being to gawk at other women. “Besides, they want me to look,” he said, “or they wouldn’t be dancing in mini skirts right above my face.”

I had to admit he was right.

The women were attractive, all dressed as I would describe as “seduction appropriate.” No embarrassment in showing their panties, no qualms with fondling other women; one tried to pry me from my chair to dance on the platform with her. I confess, I don’t know why I was sure they were heterosexual, I just conjectured they were. However, as the night wore on, many did indeed pair off with men.

When we later described this scene, friends and family raised questions as to the purpose of the girls’ actions and the issue of male fidelity. Even though my husband remained a passive observer, I felt my territorial rights invaded by the younger, sexually charged, communal dancers. Were the females’ actions in the bar that night—flipping hair, painted faces, erotic dancing—somehow, either consciously or unconsciously, solely a means to attract a mate? Was my husband, though obviously with his partner, the intended audience? Is what I witnessed in the nightclub that night part of an animalistic mating ritual?

Of course, to generalize animal behavior with human behavior can be problematic, but perhaps it is from the animal kingdom where we have inherited the ritual of dancing. I can watch for hours as frolicking dolphins perform their mating dance, diving and springing into and out of the water, turning and weaving back and forth like a well-timed waltz. Ostriches, manikin birds, and whooping cranes each have their own style of dance. Giraffes are known to prance in a kind of fox trot, and certain female spiders demand a male tap dance before they will mate. Perhaps dancing is a kind of mating ritual for humans as well as animals—a chance to show off our merchandise and attract a lifelong partner.

If the dancing I witnessed at the nightclub was some kind of inherited mating ritual, why were the dancers female, with the men as passive observers, when in the animal kingdom the mating dance

is most often performed by the male? One reason that could explain this evolutionary shift is our very own sexual revolution. Through the miracle of birth control, not only do women have more choices, it has turned our genetic instincts on their ear. Females can now copulate solely for pleasure and not necessarily to create offspring. Perhaps this new (evolutionarily speaking) freedom has shifted our natural instincts as passive observer of the male's mating dance to one of active participant. The human females' behavior has adapted with the advent of the pill.

So, what is a committed man to do when faced with these sexual temptations? Were men, or women for that matter, even biologically wired to be monogamous?

If we look to the animal kingdom, few animals of either sex—mammals, reptiles, amphibians, or otherwise—actually mate for life. Most animals take several mates throughout their reproductive lives, and many males are polygamous. Male lions, tigers, elephants, and alligators all enjoy numerous female partners throughout their lives. The porpoise will often participate in group sex (those little devils). Female promiscuity has its biological benefits—in the animal kingdom anyway. Ants with promiscuous mothers tend to survive better than those with monogamous mothers. Their colonies are more disease resistant by being genetically diverse. Some scientists believe bonobo apes to be more closely related to humans than any other species, and female bonobos are notoriously promiscuous, on record having copulated with eight different males in a time span of fifteen minutes. However, these apes not only mate to continue their lineage, they mate to maintain peace, for barter, or simply to relieve stress. With so much un-monogamous mating going on in the animal kingdom, perhaps we are fighting against our pre-rational instinct to remain faithful. Scientific evidence is overwhelmingly against the idea of monogamy. It's just not natural. Does that mean we, the human animal, are incapable of being monogamous?

One of our close cousins, the gorilla, is often thought to be monogamous, but actually only the female is. While the male gorilla keeps a harem for his pleasure, the female stands by her man for life. Other primates live together in social pairs, but still enjoy sexual dalliances. Though they don't form harems, beavers, swans, coyotes, and wolves are all monogamous until they get the urge—or chance—to cheat. Although they each keep the same mate for life, they rarely stay faithful.

Occasionally, females do get revenge. It's well known the female praying mantis bites off the head of the male after sex. Even so, the male can still complete copulation (I have often suspected as much

with the human male). Black vultures discourage infidelity by attacking other vultures caught philandering in public—a good practice, in my opinion.

Though there are some female animals who copulate outside of their “marriage,” males form the majority when it comes to cheating. Perhaps it’s the evolutionary genetic makeup of the human male animal to spread his genes over as many partners as possible. Even if this is so, don’t we have, as humans, the ability to make choices, the free will to overcome our biological urgings, if that is what it indeed is? If monogamy is unnatural, is it still impossible?

In my personal experience, the majority of the men I have been with were unfaithful. As the type of person to overanalyze everything, I have turned this over in my mind more than occasionally. Is the temptation to cheat just too great for men? Could it be an ego boost, a man’s greatest love being himself? Or is there some primordial need, as some believe, for men to spread their seed?

I mean besides the fact that I make bad choices.

I do know that as I have become a more “mature” (over forty) woman, my taste in men has changed. In my early twenties, I was more attracted to the bad-boy types that I should have known could never commit to a relationship. My choice in mates has transformed over the years to men who can provide stability and security. Research suggests females in the animal kingdom go through the same transformation as they age. The immature female bowerbird picks her mate based on his looks and swanky bachelor pad. As she gets older and more experienced, the female isn’t so easily seduced, and will base her decision on more substantial qualities—like the male’s ability to dance. The male bowerbird performs an elaborate dance of strutting, feather fluffing, and wing flipping to attract the female.

I was drawn to my current husband for similar reasons. When we first began dating, we spent the majority of our time in dance clubs. Something about the act of dancing made him desirable. Now though, after ten years of marriage, dancing has become rare at best. Still, when we are somewhere there is dancing, it’s not uncommon to have other women ask my husband to dance, because they see that he can. It is an unspoken secret between women that if you find a man who likes to dance, you’ve hit the mating jackpot. A man who proves himself to be a good dancer is never in need of a dating service.

We girls have to be careful though. Among many animals, including humans, females have the greater investment in copulation. The female copulates with the sole intention of conception, so she has to

be much more discriminating than a male when choosing a partner. Pregnancy takes a greater percentage of the females' time and energy. The male animal's role in copulation and conception is over almost immediately (as some of us girls know all too well). So, in theory, the female's egg is far more valuable to the female than the individual sperm is to the male, which drives the male to spread his sperm across the land as the female looks the other way. In the animal kingdom, except for the black vulture, no one seems to care who cheats on whom.

For every rule, there is the exception. Every time I travel south along Interstate 29, for the past several years, I have observed what I assume is the same red-tailed hawk in the same area, perched high atop a branch of a decaying tree. Never far away is his mate, always within eyesight of her partner. The red-tailed hawk is monogamous for life; only if the female dies does the male search for a new mate. The male hawk will leave his perch, circling and soaring in wide circles to great heights, then lower his wings, plummeting down, only to shoot up again. The male repeats this several times, finally approaching his partner, interlocking his talons to hers, spinning and spiraling toward the ground in an intimate dance. The dance of commitment.

Even though I have been in relationships with men who cheat, I never really felt any desire to do the same. It could be that I have inherited, through evolution, the same monogamous traits that other females in the animal kingdom possess. I know from experience that I am a monogamous animal, regardless of my mate. For now, I believe I have a loyal mate, and hope that he falls on the evolutionary side of monogamy.

Like the crane. For a few weeks each spring one of the world's greatest migrations occurs not far from where we live. Over half a million sandhill cranes return, following their migratory path they have flown for upwards of nine million years as they return north to their Arctic breeding grounds. As they rest along Nebraska's Platte River, the monogamous cranes engage in an extravagant courtship "dance"—heads bowing and thrusting, jumping up to twenty feet into the air as they spread their expansive wings. At times they can be seen tossing a corn cob or stick into the air, like a ritualistic tango.

I envy the crane. To the sandhill crane, dancing is the most important element in the bonding between male and female, a bond that lasts a lifetime. During their midwestern stopover, the cranes pair off, jumping and swaying for their intended. Since sandhill cranes mate for life, why the need for such an elaborate mating dance? It is believed cranes dance for each other to preserve familial bonds and

maintain the lines of communication. Perhaps the cranes know that it is not enough to win a partner—they need to work just as hard to keep that partner. After several weeks they continue their northern migration, and from mating until death with their partner by their side, continue their intimate dance.

Humans are not believed to be one of the naturally monogamous animals, but I choose to stay in the fight. Perhaps it is an uphill battle, but we may never be more human than when we act contrary to our impulses. Though the act of dancing had long since waned from our marriage, recently my husband and I have renewed our earlier enthusiasm for the ritual. It has evolved from a mating dance to a more subdued, yet still thrilling, act of commitment. We haven't been back to the nightclub since the night of the miniskirts. Still, occasionally, in the privacy of our home, we'll listen to vintage Bee Gees or Neil Diamond and, for no one else to see, dance.