

Mating in Captivity

Reconciling the Erotic + the Domestic

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Introduction

THE STORY OF SEX IN committed modern couples often tells of a dwindling desire and includes a long list of sexual alibis, which claim to explain the inescapable death of eros. Recently, it seems, everyone from the morning news to the *New York Times* has weighed in on the topic. They warn us that too many couples are having infrequent sex even when the partners profess to love each other. Today's twosomes are too busy, too stressed, too involved in child rearing, and too tired for sex. And if all this isn't enough to dull their senses, then it's the antidepressants meant to alleviate the stress that set off the final unraveling. This is indeed an ironic development for the baby boomers who some thirty years ago ushered in a new age of sexual liberation. Now that these men and women and the generations who have followed can have as much sex as they want, they seem to have lost their desire for it.

Though I have no quarrel with the accuracy of these reports in the media—our lives are surely more stressful than they should be—it seems to me that in focusing almost exclusively on the frequency and quantity of sexual relations, they address only the most superficial reasons for the malaise so many couples are feeling. I think there's more to the story.

Psychologists, sex therapists, and social observers have long grappled with the Gordian knot of how to reconcile sexuality and domesticity. We're offered prolific advice on how to shop in the

spice market to add additional flavors to committed sex. Languishing desire, we're coached, is a scheduling problem that can be fixed with better prioritizing and organizational skills; or it is a communication problem that can be ameliorated by verbally expressing precisely what we want sexually.

I'm less inclined toward a statistical approach to sex—whether you're still having it, how often, how long it lasts, who comes first, and how many orgasms you have. Instead, I want to address the questions that don't have easy answers. This book speaks about eroticism and the poetics of sex, the nature of erotic desire and its attendant dilemmas. When you love someone, how does it feel? And when you desire someone, how is it different? Does good intimacy always lead to good sex? Why is it that the transition to parenthood so often spells erotic disaster? Why is the forbidden so erotic? Is it possible to want what we already have?

We all share a fundamental need for security, which propels us toward committed relationships in the first place; but we have an equally strong need for adventure and excitement. Modern romance promises that it's possible to meet these two distinct sets of needs in one place. Still, I'm not convinced. Today, we turn to one person to provide what an entire village once did: a sense of grounding, meaning, and continuity. At the same time, we expect our committed relationships to be romantic as well as emotionally and sexually fulfilling. Is it any wonder that so many relationships crumble under the weight of it all? It's hard to generate excitement, anticipation, and lust with the same person you look to for comfort and stability, but it's not impossible. I invite you to think about ways you might introduce risk to safety, mystery to the familiar, and novelty to the enduring.

On the way, we will address how the modern ideology of love sometimes collides with the forces of desire. Love flourishes in an atmosphere of closeness, mutuality, and equality. We seek to know

our beloved, to keep him near, to contract the distance between us. We care about those we love, worry about them, and feel responsible for them. For some of us, love and desire are inseparable. But for many others, emotional intimacy inhibits erotic expression. The caring, protective elements that foster love often block the unself-consciousness that fuels erotic pleasure.

My belief, reinforced by twenty years of practice, is that in the course of establishing security, many couples confuse love with merging. This mix-up is a bad omen for sex. To sustain an *élan* toward the other, there must be a synapse to cross. Eroticism requires separateness. In other words, eroticism thrives in the space between the self and the other. In order to commune with the one we love, we must be able to tolerate this void and its pall of uncertainties.

With this paradox to chew on, consider another: desire is often accompanied by feelings that would seem to cramp love's style. Aggression, jealousy, and discord come to mind, for starters. I will explore the cultural pressures that shape domesticated sex, making it fair, equal, and safe, but also producing many bored couples. I'd like to suggest that we might have more exciting, playful, even frivolous sex if we were less constrained by our cultural penchant for democracy in the bedroom.

To buttress this notion, I take the reader on a detour into social history. We'll see that contemporary couples invest more in love than ever before; yet, in a cruel twist of fate it is this very model of love and marriage that is behind the exponential rise in the divorce rate. Here it behooves us to question whether traditional marital structures can ever meet the modern mandate, especially when "till death do us part" entails a life span double that of past centuries.

The magic elixir that's meant to make this possible is intimacy. We'll get to the bottom of this by looking through various lenses, but here it's worth pointing out that the stereotype of women as entirely romantic and men as sexual conquistadors should have

been dispelled a long time ago. The same goes for any ideas that cast women as longing for love, essentially faithful, and domestically inclined, and men as biologically non-monogamous and fearful of intimacy. As a result of social and economic changes that have occurred in recent western history, traditional gender lines have been circumvented, and these qualities are now seen in both men and women. While stereotypes can hold considerable truth, they fall short of capturing the complexities of contemporary relationships. I seek a more androgynous approach to love.

As a couples therapist, I have inverted the usual therapeutic priorities. In my field we are taught to inquire about the state of the union first and then ask how this is manifested in the bedroom. Seen this way, the sexual relationship is a metaphor for the overall relationship. The underlying assumption is that if we can improve the relationship, the sex will follow. But in my experience, this is often not the case.

Traditionally, the therapeutic culture has favored the spoken word over the expressiveness of the body. Yet sexuality and emotional intimacy are two separate languages. I would like to restore the body to its rightful prominent place in discussions about couples and eroticism. The body often contains emotional truths that words can too easily gloss over. The very dynamics that are a source of conflict in a relationship—particularly those pertaining to power, control, dependency, and vulnerability—often become desirable when experienced through the body and eroticized. Sex becomes both a way to illuminate conflicts and confusion around intimacy and desire and a way to begin to heal these destructive splits. Each partner's body, imprinted as it is with the individual's history and the culture's admonitions, becomes a text to be read by all of us together.

In keeping with the theme of reading, this is as good a time as any to explain some terms you'll encounter in this book. For clarity,

I will use the word “marriage” to refer to long-term emotional commitments, not just to a legal status. And I sometimes like to move freely between male and female pronouns without necessarily heaping judgment on either gender.

I myself, as my name gives away, am of the female persuasion. Less obvious, perhaps, is that I’m a cultural hybrid. I live on many shores, and I want to bring an informed cultural view—or multicultural view—to the topic of this book. I grew up in Belgium, studied in Israel, and finished my training in the United States. Shuttling between various cultures for more than thirty years, I have formed the perspective of someone who is comfortable watching from the sidelines. This vantage point has provided me with multiple perspectives for my observations on how we develop sexually, how we connect to one another, how we narrate love, and how we engage in the pleasures of the body.

I’ve transferred my personal experience to my professional work as a clinician, teacher, and consultant working in cross-cultural psychology. Having focused on cultural transition, I’ve specifically worked with three populations: refugee families and international families (the two groups that move most these days, albeit for very different reasons) and intercultural couples (which include interracial and interfaith pairings). For intercultural couples, the cultural shifts do not stem from a geographic move, but instead take place in their own living rooms. What really piqued my interest was how this merging of cultures influenced gender relations and child-rearing practices. I pondered the many meanings of marriage, and how its role and its place in the larger family system varies in different national contexts. Is it a private act of two individuals or a communal affair between two families? In my sessions with couples, I tried to discern the cultural nuances behind the discussion of commitment, intimacy, pleasure, orgasm, and the body. Love may be universal, but its constructions in each culture

are defined, both literally and figuratively, in different languages. I was particularly sensitive to the conversations about child and adolescent sexuality because it is in messages to children that societies most reveals their values, goals, incentives, prohibitions.

I speak eight languages. Some I learned at home, some at school, a few during my travels, and one or two through love. In my practice, I am called on to use my multicultural proficiency as well as my skill as a polyglot. My patients are straight and gay (I don't work with the transgender population at this time), married, committed, single, and remarried. They are young, old, and in between. They cover a wide spectrum of cultures, race, and class. Their individual stories highlight the cultural and psychological forces that shape how we love and how we desire.

One of my most formative personal experiences underlying this book may seem circuitous, but I must reveal it to you, as it sheds a light on the deeper motivations that fuel my passion. My parents were survivors of Nazi concentration camps. For a number of years, they stood face-to-face with death every day. My mother and father were the sole survivors of their respective families. They came out of this experience wanting to charge at life with a vengeance and to make the most of each day. They both felt that they had been granted a unique gift: living life again. My parents were unusual, I think. They didn't just want to survive; they wanted to revive. They possessed a thirst for life, thrived on exuberant experiences, and loved to have a good time. They cultivated pleasure. I know absolutely nothing about their sexual life except that they had two children, my brother and me. But by the way they lived, I sensed that they had a deep understanding of eroticism. Though I doubt that they ever used this word, they embodied its mystical meaning as a quality of aliveness, a pathway to freedom—not just the narrow definition of sex that modernity has assigned to it. It is this expanded understanding that I bring to bear on my discussion of eroticism in this book.

There is yet another powerful influence that has helped shape this project. My husband is the director of the International Trauma Studies Program at Columbia University. His work is devoted to assisting refugees, children of war, and victims of torture as they seek to overcome the massive trauma they've experienced. By restoring their sense of creativity and their capacity for play and pleasure, these survivors are ultimately helped to reconnect with life and the hope that fuels it. My husband deals with pain; I deal with pleasure. They are intimately acquainted.

The individuals I write about do not appear in the acknowledgments, though I owe them a great deal. Their stories are authentic and almost verbatim, but their identities are masked. Throughout this project, I've shared excerpts with them in the spirit of collaboration. Many of my ideas were developed through my work, and not the other way around. My ideas also draw on the wealth of careful considerations made by many professionals and authors who have previously tackled the ambiguities of love and desire.

Every day in my work I am confronted with the detailed realities that hide behind statistics. I see people who are such good friends that they cannot sustain being lovers. I see lovers who hold so tenaciously to the idea that sex must be spontaneous that they never have it at all. I see couples who view seduction as too much work, something they shouldn't have to do now that they're committed. I see others who believe that intimacy means knowing everything about each other. They abdicate any sense of separateness, then are left wondering where the mystery has gone. I see wives who would rather carry the label "low sexual desire" for the rest of their lives than suffer explaining to their husbands that foreplay needs to be more than a prelude to the real thing. I see people so desperate to beat back a feeling of deadness in their partnerships that they're willing to risk everything for a few moments of forbidden excitement with someone else. I see couples whose sex lives are rekindled by an

affair, and others for whom an affair effectively ends what little connection remained. I see older men who feel betrayed by their newly unresponsive penises, who rush for Viagra to soften the anxiety of the hard facts; I see their wives made uncomfortable by the sudden challenge to their own passivity. I see new parents whose erotic energy has been sapped by caring for an infant—so consumed by their child that they don't remember to close the bedroom door once in a while. I see the man who looks at porn online not because he doesn't find his wife attractive but because her lack of enthusiasm leaves him feeling that there's something wrong with him for wanting sex. I see people so ashamed of their sexuality that they spare the one they love the ordeal. I see people who know they are loved, but who long to be desired. They all come to see me because they yearn for erotic vitality. Sometimes they come sheepishly; sometimes they arrive desperate, dejected, enraged. They don't just miss sex, the act; they miss the feeling of connection, playfulness, and renewal that sex allows them. I invite you to join me in my conversations with these questers as we work toward opening up and coming a step closer to transcendence.

For those who aspire to accelerate their heartbeat periodically, I give them the score: excitement is interwoven with uncertainty, and with our willingness to embrace the unknown rather than to shield ourselves from it. But this very tension leaves us feeling vulnerable. I caution my patients that there is no such thing as "safe sex."

I should point out, however, that not all lovers seek passion, or even, at one time, basked in it. Some relationships originate in feelings of warmth, tenderness, and nurturance, and the partners choose to remain in these calmer waters. They prefer a love that is built on patience more than on passion. To them, finding serenity in a lasting bond is what counts. There is no one way, and there is no right way.

Mating in Captivity aspires to engage you in an honest, enlightened, and provocative discussion. It encourages you to question yourself, to speak the unspoken, and to be unafraid to challenge sexual and emotional correctness. By flinging the doors open on erotic life and domesticity, I invite you to put the X back in sex.

From Adventure to Captivity

Why the Quest for Security Saps Erotic Vitality

The original primordial fire of eroticism is sexuality; it raises the red flame of eroticism, which in turn raises and feeds another flame, tremulous and blue. It is the flame of love and eroticism. The double flame of life.

—Octavio Paz, *The Double Flame*

PARTIES IN NEW YORK CITY are like anthropological field trips—you never know whom you’ll meet or what you’ll find. Recently I was milling around a self-consciously hip event, and, as is typical in this city of high achievers, before being asked my name I was asked what I do. I answered, “I’m a therapist, and I’m writing a book.” The handsome young man standing next to me was also working on a book. “What are you writing about?” I asked him. “Physics,” he answered. Politely, I mustered the next question, “What kind of physics?” I can’t remember what his answer was, because the conversation about physics ended abruptly when someone asked me, “And you? What’s your book about?” “Couples and eroticism,” I answered.

Never was my Q rating as high—at parties, in cabs, at the nail salon, on airplanes, with teenagers, with my husband, you name

it—as when I began writing a book about sex. I realize that there are certain topics that chase people away and others that act like magnets. People talk to me. Of course, that doesn't mean they tell me the truth. If there's one topic that invites concealment, it's this one.

“What about couples and eroticism?” someone asks.

“I'm writing about the nature of sexual desire,” I reply. “I want to know if it's possible to keep desire alive in a long-term relationship, to avoid its usual wear.”

“You don't necessarily need love for sex, but you need sex in love,” says a man who's been standing on the sidelines, still undecided about which conversation to join.

“You focus mainly on married couples? Straight couples?” another asks. Read: is this book also about me? I reassure him, “I'm looking at myriad couples. Straight, gay, young, old, committed, and undecided.”

I tell them I want to know how, or if, we can hold on to a sense of aliveness and excitement in our relationships. Is there something inherent in commitment that deadens desire? Can we ever maintain security without succumbing to monotony? I wonder if we can preserve a sense of the poetic, of what Octavio Paz calls the double flame of love and eroticism.

I've had this conversation many times, and the comments I heard at this party were hardly novel.

“Can't be done.”

“Well, that's the whole problem of monogamy, isn't it?”

“That's why I don't commit. It has nothing to do with fear. I just hate boring sex.”

“Desire over time? What about desire for one night?”

“Relationships evolve. Passion turns into something else.”

“I gave up on passion when I had kids.”

“Look, there are men you sleep with and men you marry.”

As often happens in a public discussion, the most complex issues tend to polarize in a flash, and nuance is replaced with caricature. Hence the division between the romantics and the realists. The romantics refuse a life without passion; they swear that they'll never give up on true love. They are the perennial seekers, looking for the person with whom desire will never fizzle. Every time desire does wane, they conclude that love is gone. If eros is in decline, love must be on its deathbed. They mourn the loss of excitement and fear settling down.

At the opposite extreme are the realists. They say that enduring love is more important than hot sex, and that passion makes people do stupid things. It's dangerous, it creates havoc, and it's a weak foundation for marriage. In the immortal words of Marge Simpson, "Passion is for teenagers and foreigners." For the realists, maturity prevails. The initial excitement grows into something else—deep love, mutual respect, shared history, and companionship. Diminishing desire is inescapable. You are expected to tough it out and grow up.

As the conversation unfolds, the two camps eye each other with a complex alloy of pity, tenderness, envy, exasperation, and outright scorn. But while they position themselves at opposite ends of the spectrum, both agree with the fundamental premise that passion cools over time.

"Some of you resist the loss of intensity, some of you accept it, but all of you seem to believe that desire fades. What you disagree on is just how important the loss really is," I comment. Romantics value intensity over stability. Realists value security over passion. But both are often disappointed, for few people can live happily at either extreme.

Invariably, I'm asked if my book offers a solution. What can people do? Hidden behind this question looms a secret longing for the *élan vital*, the surge of erotic energy that marks our aliveness.

Whatever safety and security people have persuaded themselves to settle for, they still very much want this force in their lives. So I've become acutely attuned to the moment when all these ruminations about the inevitable loss of passion turn into expressions of hope. The real questions are these: Can we have both love and desire in the same relationship over time? How? What exactly would that kind of relationship be?

The Anchor and the Wave

Call me an idealist, but I believe that love and desire are not mutually exclusive, they just don't always take place at the same time. In fact, security and passion are two separate, fundamental human needs that spring from different motives and tend to pull us in different directions. In his book *Can Love Last?* the infinitely thoughtful psychoanalyst Stephen Mitchell offers a framework for thinking about this conundrum. As he explains it, we all need security: permanence, reliability, stability, and continuity. These rooting, nesting instincts ground us in our human experience. But we also have a need for novelty and change, generative forces that give life fullness and vibrancy. Here risk and adventure loom large. We're walking contradictions, seeking safety and predictability on one hand and thriving on diversity on the other.

Ever watch a child run away to explore and then run right back to make sure that Mom and Dad are still there? Little Sammy needs to feel secure in order to go into the world and discover; and once he has satisfied his need for exploration, he wants to go back to his safe base to reconnect. It's a sport he'll come back to as an adult, culminating in the games of eros. Periods of being bold and taking risks will alternate with periods of seeking grounding and safety. He may fluctuate, though he'll generally settle on one preference over another.

And what is true for human beings is true for every living thing: all organisms require alternating periods of growth and equilibrium. Any person or system exposed to ceaseless novelty and change risks falling into chaos; but one that is too rigid or static ceases to grow and eventually dies. This never-ending dance between change and stability is like the anchor and the waves.

Adult relationships mirror these dynamics all too well. We seek a steady, reliable anchor in our partner. Yet at the same time we expect love to offer a transcendent experience that will allow us to soar beyond our ordinary lives. The challenge for modern couples lies in reconciling the need for what's safe and predictable with the wish to pursue what's exciting, mysterious, and awe-inspiring.

For a lucky few, this is barely a challenge. These couples can easily integrate cleaning the garage with rubbing each other's back. For them, there is no dissonance between commitment and excitement, responsibility and playfulness. They can buy a home and be naughty in it, too. They can be parents and still be lovers. In short, they're able to seamlessly meld the ordinary and the uncanny. But for the rest of us, seeking excitement in the same relationship in which we establish permanence is a tall order. Unfortunately, too many love stories develop in such a way that we sacrifice passion so as to achieve stability.

So What Is It I Want?

Adele comes into my office holding half a sandwich in one hand and some paperwork she's doing on the fly in the other. At thirty-eight, she is a well-established lawyer in private practice. She's been married to Alan for seven years. It is a second marriage for both of them, and they have a daughter, Emilia, who's five. Adele is dressed simply and elegantly, though she's been meaning to get to the hairdresser for a while now and it shows.

“I want to get right to it,” she says. “Eighty percent of the time I’m happy with him. I’m really happy.” Not a minute to waste for this organized and accomplished woman. “He doesn’t say certain things; he doesn’t gush; but he’s a really nice guy. I pick up the newspaper, and I feel fortunate. We’re all healthy; we have enough money; our house has never caught on fire; we don’t have to dodge bullets on the way home from work. I know how bad it can be out there. So what is it I want?”

“I look at my friend Marc, who’s getting divorced from his third wife because, he says, ‘She doesn’t inspire me.’ So I ask Alan, ‘Do I inspire you?’ and you know what he says? ‘You inspire me to cook chicken every Sunday.’ He makes a fantastic coq au vin and you know why? Because he wants to please me; he knows I like it.

“So I’m trying to figure out what it is that I miss. You know that feeling you have the first year, that fluttery, exciting feeling, the butterflies in your stomach, the physical passion? I don’t even know if I can get that anymore. And when I bring this up to Alan, he gets this face. ‘Oh, you want to talk about Brad and Jen again?’ Even Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston got tired of each other, right? I’ve studied biology; I know how the synapses work, how overuse lessens the reaction; I get that. Excitement wanes, yeah yeah yeah. But even if I can’t have that fluttery butterfly feeling, I want to feel something.

“The realistic part of me knows that the excitement in the beginning is because of the insecurity in not quite knowing what he’s feeling. When we were dating and the phone rang the reason it was exciting was that I didn’t know it would be him. Now when he travels I tell him *not* to call me. I don’t want to be woken up. The more intelligent part of me says, ‘I don’t want insecurity. I’m married. I have a kid. I don’t need to worry every time he leaves town: Does he like me? Does he not like me? Is he going to cheat?’

You know those magazine tests: How to tell if he really loves you. I don't want to worry about that. I don't need that with my husband right now. But I'd like to recapture some of that excitement.

“By the end of a long day at work, taking care of Emilia and cooking a meal, cleaning up, checking things off my list, sex is the farthest thing from my mind. I don't even want to talk to anyone. Sometimes Alan watches TV and I go into the bedroom to read and I am very happy. So what is it I'm trying to put into words here? Because I'm not just talking about sex. I want to be appreciated *as a woman*. Not as a mother, not as a wife, not as a companion. And I want to appreciate him *as a man*. It could be a gaze, a touch, a word. I want to be looked at without all the baggage.

“He says it goes both ways. He's right. It's not like I put on my negligee and go hubba hubba. I'm lazy in the 'make me feel special' department. When we first met I bought him a briefcase for his birthday—something he saw in a store window and loved—and it had two tickets to Paris inside. This year I gave him a DVD and we celebrated with a couple of friends by eating a meat loaf his mother had made. Nothing against meat loaf, but that's what it's come to. I don't know why I don't do more. I've become complacent.”

Adele, in her breathless riff, vividly captures the tension between the comfort of committed love and its muting effect on erotic vitality. Familiarity is indeed reassuring, and it brings a sense of security that Adele would never dream of giving up. At the same time, she wants to recapture the quality of aliveness and excitement that she and Alan had in the beginning. She wants both the coziness and the edge, and she wants them both with him.

The Era of Pleasure

Not so long ago, the desire to feel passionate about one's husband would have been considered a contradiction in terms. Historically,

these two realms of life were organized separately—marriage on one side and passion most likely somewhere else, if anywhere at all. The concept of romantic love, which came about toward the end of the nineteenth century, brought them together for the first time. The central place of sex in marriage, and the heightened expectations surrounding it, took decades more to arrive.

The social and cultural transformations of the past fifty years have redefined modern coupledness. Alan and Adele are beneficiaries of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, women's liberation, the availability of birth control pills, and the emergence of the gay movement. With the widespread use of the pill, sex became liberated from reproduction. Feminism and gay pride fought to define sexual expression as an inalienable right. Anthony Giddens describes this transition in *The Transformation of Intimacy* when he explains that sexuality became a property of the self, one that we develop, define, and renegotiate throughout our lives. Today, our sexuality is an open-ended personal project; it is part of who we are, an identity, and no longer merely something we do. It has become a central feature of intimate relationships, and sexual satisfaction, we believe, is our due. The era of pleasure has arrived.

These developments, in conjunction with postwar economic prosperity, have contributed to a period of unmatched freedom and individualism. People today are encouraged to pursue personal fulfillment and sexual gratification, and to break free of the constraints of a social and family life heretofore defined by duty and obligation. But trailing in the shadow of this manifest extravagance lies a new kind of gnawing insecurity. The extended family, the community, and religion may indeed have limited our freedom, sexual and otherwise, but in return they offered us a much-needed sense of belonging. For generations, these traditional institutions provided order, meaning, continuity, and social support. Dismantling them has left us with more choices and fewer restrictions than

ever. We are freer, but also more alone. As Giddens describes it, we have become ontologically more anxious.

We bring to our love relationships this free-floating anxiety. Love, beyond providing emotional sustenance, compassion, and companionship, is now expected to act as a panacea for existential aloneness as well. We look to our partner as a bulwark against the vicissitudes of modern life. It is not that our human insecurity is greater today than in earlier times. In fact, quite the contrary may be true. What is different is that modern life has deprived us of our traditional resources, and has created a situation in which we turn to one person for the protection and emotional connections that a multitude of social networks used to provide. Adult intimacy has become overburdened with expectations.

Of course, when Adele describes the state of her marriage she isn't thinking about contemporary angst. But I believe that the perils of love are heightened by the particular modern pangs we bring to it. We live miles away from our families, no longer know our childhood friends, and are regularly uprooted and transplanted. All this discontinuity has a cumulative effect. We bring to our romantic relationships an almost unbearable existential vulnerability—as if love itself weren't dangerous enough.

A Modern Love Story: The Short Version

You meet someone through a potent alchemy of attraction. It is a sweet reaction and it's always a surprise. You're filled with a sense of possibility, of hope, of being lifted out of the mundane and into a world of emotion and enthrallment. Love grabs you, and you feel powerful. You cherish the rush, and you want to hold on to the feeling. You're also scared. The more you become attached, the more you have to lose. So you set out to make love more secure. You seek to fix it, to make it dependable. You make your first commitments,

and happily give up a little bit of freedom in exchange for a little bit of stability. You create comfort through devices—habit, ritual, pet names—that bring reassurance. But the excitement was bound to a certain measure of insecurity. Your high resulted from the uncertainty, and now, by seeking to harness it, you wind up draining the vitality out of the relationship. You enjoy the comfort, but complain that you feel constrained. You miss the spontaneity. In your attempt to control the risks of passion, you have tamed it out of existence. Marital boredom is born.

While love promises us relief from aloneness, it also heightens our dependence on one person. It is inherently vulnerable. We tend to assuage our anxieties through control. We feel safer if we can contract the distance between us, maximize the certainty, minimize the threats, and contain the unknown. Yet some of us defend against the uncertainties of love with such zeal that we cut ourselves off from its richness.

There's a powerful tendency in long-term relationships to favor the predictable over the unpredictable. Yet eroticism thrives on the unpredictable. Desire butts heads with habit and repetition. It is unruly, and it defies our attempts at control. So where does that leave us? We don't want to throw away the security, because our relationship depends on it. A sense of physical and emotional safety is basic to healthy pleasure and connection. Yet without an element of uncertainty there is no longing, no anticipation, no frisson. The motivational expert Anthony Robbins put it succinctly when he explained that passion in a relationship is commensurate with the amount of uncertainty you can tolerate.

Having New Eyes

How are we to introduce this uncertainty into our intimate relationships? How are we to create this gentle imbalance? In truth, it

is already there. Eastern philosophers have long known that impermanence is the only constant. Given the transient nature of life, given its ceaseless flux, there is more than a hint of arrogance in the assumption that we can make our relationships permanent, and that security can actually be fixed. As the adage says: “If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.” Yet with blind faith we forge ahead. As loyal citizens of the modern world we believe in our own efficacy.

We liken the passion of the beginning to adolescent intoxication—both transient and unrealistic. The consolation for giving it up is the security that waits on the other side. Yet when we trade passion for stability, are we not merely swapping one fantasy for another? As Stephen Mitchell points out, the fantasy of permanence may trump the fantasy of passion, but both are products of our imagination. We long for constancy, we may labor for it, but it is never guaranteed. When we love we always risk the possibility of loss—by criticism, rejection, separation, and ultimately death—regardless of how hard we try to defend against it. Introducing uncertainty sometimes requires nothing more than letting go of the illusion of certitude. In this shift of perception, we recognize the inherent mystery of our partner.

I point out to Adele that if we are to maintain desire with one person over time we must be able to bring a sense of unknown into a familiar space. In the words of Proust, “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.”

Adele recalls a moment when she experienced just this kind of perceptual shift. “Let me tell you what happened two weeks ago,” she says. “It is so rare that I even remember the moment. We were at a work function, and Alan was talking with some colleagues, and I looked at him and thought: he’s so attractive. It was almost weird, like an out-of-body experience. And you know what was so

attractive? For a moment there I forgot that he's my husband and a real pain in the ass, obnoxious, stubborn, that he annoys me, that he leaves his mess all over the floor. At that moment I saw him as if I didn't know all that, and I was drawn to him like in the beginning. He's very smart; he talks well; he has this soothing, sexy way about him. I wasn't thinking about all our stupid exchanges when we bicker in the morning because I'm running late, or why did you do this, or what's going on for Christmas, or we have to talk about your mother. I was away from all that inane stuff and those absurd conversations. I just really saw him. That's how I felt, and I wonder if he ever feels like that about me anymore."

When I ask Adele if she has ever told Alan of that experience, she is quick to let me know that she hasn't. "No way. He'll make fun of me." I suggest that maybe the waning of romance is less about the bounds of familiarity and the weight of reality than it is about fear. Eroticism is risky. People are afraid to allow themselves these moments of idealization and yearning for the person they live with. It introduces a recognition of the other's sovereignty that can feel destabilizing. When our partner stands alone, with his own will and freedom, the delicateness of our bond is magnified. Adele's vulnerability is obvious in the way she wonders if Alan ever feels this way about her.

The typical defense against this threat is to stay within the realm of the familiar and the affectionate—the trivial bickering, the comfortable sex, the quotidian aspects of life that keep us tethered to reality and bar any chance of transcendence.

But when Adele looks at Alan out of the context of their marriage—switching from a zoom lens to a wide-angle—his otherness is accentuated, and that in turn heightens Adele's attraction to him. She sees him *as a man*. She has transformed someone familiar into someone still unknown after all these years.

Just When You Thought You Knew Her . . .

If uncertainty is a built-in feature of all relationships, so too is mystery. Many of the couples who come to therapy imagine that they know everything there is to know about their mate. “My husband doesn’t like to talk.” “My girlfriend would never flirt with another man. She’s not the type.” “My lover doesn’t do therapy.” “Why don’t you just say it? I know what you’re thinking?” “I don’t need to give her lavish presents; she knows I love her.” I try to highlight for them how little they’ve seen, urging them to recover their curiosity and catch a glimpse behind the walls that barricade the other.

In truth, we never know our partner as well as we think we do. Mitchell reminds us that even in the dullest marriages, predictability is a mirage. Our need for constancy limits how much we are willing to know the person who’s next to us. We are invested in having him or her conform to an image that is often a creation of our own imagination, based on our own set of needs. “One thing about him is that he’s never anxious. He’s like a rock. I’m so neurotic.” “He’s too much of a wimp to leave me.” “She doesn’t put up with any of my shit.” “We’re both very traditional. Even though she has a PhD, she really likes staying home with the kids.” We see what we want to see, what we can tolerate seeing, and our partner does the same. Neutralizing each other’s complexity affords us a kind of manageable otherness. We narrow down our partner, ignoring or rejecting essential parts when they threaten the established order of our coupledness. We also reduce ourselves, jettisoning large chunks of our personalities in the name of love.

Yet when we peg ourselves and our partners to fixed entities, we needn’t be surprised that passion goes out the window. And I’m sorry to say that the loss is on both sides. Not only have you squeezed out the passion, but you haven’t really gained safety, either.

The fragility of this manufactured equilibrium becomes obvious when one partner breaks the rules of the contrivance and insists on bringing more authentic parts of himself into the relationship.

This is what happened to Charles and Rose. Married for almost four decades, they've had a lot of time to define one another. Charles is mercurial, a provocateur, and a playful seducer. He is a passionate man in need of a container, someone to help him channel the unbridled energies that distract him. "If it weren't for Rose, I don't think I would have the career and family I have today," he says. Rose is strong, independent, and clearheaded. She possesses a kind of natural equanimity that calibrates his intemperateness. As they describe it, she is the solid; he, the fluid. The few times Rose ventured into passionate territory before meeting Charles, she found it overwhelming. It left her depleted and unhappy. What he represents for her is passion that she doesn't have to own. What scares Rose is the loss of control and what scares Charles is that he enjoys the loss of control too much. The complementarity of their relationship allows them to flourish within a bounded space.

This fertile arrangement worked reasonably well until the day it didn't. As so often happens, there is a moment when we recognize that what we're doing is no longer working. Often it follows significant events that make us review the meaning and the structure of our lives. Suddenly, the compromises that worked so well yesterday become sacrifices we no longer want to brook today. For Charles, a succession of losses—the death of his mother, the death of a close friend, and a scare regarding his own health—have made him keenly aware of his own mortality. He wants to charge at life, to ply his vitality, to reconnect with the exuberance that he's kept in check in order to be with Rose. He can no longer bear to keep that part of himself tucked away, even in exchange for the solid ground Rose offers. But every time he tries to talk about this hunger, Rose

feels threatened and dismisses him. “You’re having another midlife crisis? What are you going to do, buy a red Trans-Am?”

Rose and Charles have both had their nonmonogamous interludes over the years. The facts were known, the details were not; and they put these episodes behind them. Or at least Rose did. “I thought we were past our turbulent years. We’re in our sixties, for God’s sake,” she moans.

“And that precludes what?” I ask her.

“Hurting me! Risking our marriage! I’ve come to accept the terms of our relationship. Why can’t he?”

“And those terms are?”

“When we married, we loved each other very much. We still do. But, shall we say, we had both known stronger passions. Charles came out of it disillusioned—the high intensity was always short-lived, and he was left with women he didn’t have much in common with. I came out of it relieved. I got too lost in it. We talked about it back then, that we were both looking for something more enduring and a little calmer.” Rose goes on to explain that she and Charles had other goals for their marriage—companionship, intellectual stimulation, physical and emotional care, support. “We really valued what we had found with each other.”

Rose grew up poor. Her father ran a junkyard in rural Tennessee. Today she has a corner office on the fifty-sixth floor overlooking Madison Avenue in Manhattan. “My hillbilly town wasn’t exactly supportive of girls with ambition, and I had a lot. When I met Charles, I knew he was different. I could be with him and he would let me do my own thing. In the early 1960s, that was a big deal.”

“What did you think was going to happen sexually? That was a big deal in the sixties, too,” I say.

“I was OK with our sex life. I thought it was fine, even nice,” she tells me. “I’ve always known that for Charles it wasn’t enough, but I expected him to deal with it.”

In a private session with Charles a few weeks later, Charles gives me his take on things. “Sex with Rose is nice, but it’s always been kind of flat. Sometimes I can deal with the low intensity; other times it’s been unbearable. I’ve gone online, I’ve gone outside of the marriage, I’ve gone to Rose. Mostly I tried to squelch it, because there doesn’t seem to be room for this between us. But I don’t want to do that anymore. Life is too short. I’m getting older. When I feel erotically alive, as you call it, I don’t worry about death and I don’t worry about my age, at least for a few moments.

“Frankly, I’m surprised at her reaction,” he continues. “It’s been years since she was interested in sex. This may sound strange, but I honestly didn’t think she’d feel so strongly about my being involved with other women. Even though I’m not exclusive any longer, I’m as emotionally faithful and committed as I’ve always been. I don’t want to hurt her, and I certainly don’t want to leave her, but something had to change for me.”

Charles isn’t behaving according to the script, but then neither is Rose. She is fragile and afraid, not the invincible woman Charles needs her to be. Just as they had banished his seductiveness, they had also suppressed her vulnerability. They have outgrown their respective roles, and they are in a crisis.

Unbeknownst to them, this may be the greatest opportunity for expansion they’ve had in years, for it allows them to express parts of themselves that have long been denied. It’s tiresome to have to be in control all the time, and Rose was due for a break. It’s equally draining to feel erotically impoverished, and Charles’s refusal to tolerate this situation was his first step in bringing more authentic parts of himself to Rose. Ironically, in the midst of this emotional turmoil they began making love again after many years apart. Rose’s desire for Charles came back to life in tandem with his interest in other women. The more he eludes her, the more she wants him. And for his part, seeing her care so much about what he does has a profound erotic appeal.

For a long time their relationship operated on a contract of mutuality. They were not to express feelings or needs that exceeded what they had been allocated. They were not to be irrational, insensitive, or greedy. Now, however, they both were making strong claims. They made demands on each other that they didn't want to give up on. There was a lot of pain, but at the same time there was a vibrancy that neither could deny.

"I haven't felt this lousy in years," Rose tells me. "But underneath, I can see it needed to happen. I've always focused on the tangible stuff—the money, the house, the kids in college—thinking that's what's solid. But who says that what Charles is after is so frivolous? Maybe it's another way of taking care of a marriage."

By refusing to acknowledge anything that falls outside the accepted range of behavior, Charles and Rose had achieved the opposite of what they were seeking. Rather than making their love more secure, they had, in fact, made it more vulnerable. But allowing both of them to reveal heretofore segregated parts of themselves was not without risk. The very foundation of their relationship was at stake. Each of them would have to tolerate the unfolding of the other, even if it took them beyond their range of comfort.

Dismantling the Security System

We often expect our relationship to act as a buttress against the slings and arrows of life. But love, by its very nature, is unstable. So we shore it up: we tighten the borders, batten down the hatches, and create predictability, all in an effort to make us feel more secure. Yet the mechanisms that we put in place to make love safer often put us more at risk. We ground ourselves in familiarity, and perhaps achieve a peaceful domestic arrangement, but in the process we orchestrate boredom. The verve of the relationship collapses under the weight of all that control. Stultified, couples are

left wondering, “Whatever happened to fun? What ever happened to excitement, to transcendence, to awe?”

Desire is fueled by the unknown, and for that reason it’s inherently anxiety-producing. In his book *Open to Desire*, the Buddhist psychoanalyst Mark Epstein explains that our willingness to engage that mystery keeps desire alive. Faced with the irrefutable otherness of our partner, we can respond with fear or with curiosity. We can try to reduce the other to a knowable entity, or we can embrace her persistent mystery. When we resist the urge to control, when we keep ourselves open, we preserve the possibility of discovery. Eroticism resides in the ambiguous space between anxiety and fascination. We remain interested in our partners; they delight us, and we’re drawn to them. But, for many of us, renouncing the illusion of safety, and accepting the reality of our fundamental insecurity, proves to be a difficult step.