

# The Naked Eye

## Gorilla Love

BY MARK MATOUSEK

*Can a man's animal nature and his need for intimacy coexist in peace?*

After an interview this past fall, I was cornered in a London radio station by a preppie producer who asked me if I had a minute to talk, then led me to a quiet place by the coat closet for more privacy. "What you said in there about sex interested me."

"Really?"

"About sex being part of a spiritual path." He lowered his voice and looked suddenly anxious. "It doesn't really seem to work."

"What's the problem?" I asked, feeling like Dr. Ruth.

He described his dilemma. Although he and his longtime girlfriend were deeply in love, they'd hit a sexual impasse. Every time they started making love, this seemingly gentle guy turned into a snorting gorilla and treated his partner accordingly—not abusively, he assured me, but most definitely as a sex object. This sudden tone-change in an otherwise equal, intimate partnership upset them both and had started to make lovemaking more confusing than it was fun. In order to maintain their feeling of closeness—as paradoxical as this sounds—they'd stopped having sex altogether, fully realizing that this wasn't a long-term solution. Now the poor guy felt cornered. "I like to act like an animal in bed," he admitted. "I don't know if I want to change that. But if I don't, she's going to leave me. What would you do?"

God knows why he was asking me. I'd said on the program that I had no clue what to do with this bestial side of sexual nature, this hunger "red in tooth and claw" for nasty animal flesh. The struggle to untangle the shadowy knot of sex and love in a

seeker's life had been dominating my own path for years—much more than the quest for light—and this obsession was evolving into a new book. But as for solutions, I was bare. The best advice I could give him that morning was to stop taking the full blame for several million years of

bringing their divided selves together in an erotic relationship, they're stumped. The questions at hand, though far from new, are as urgent as ever.

Are men truly cut out to be monogamous? Are love and lust, in the long run, mutually exclusive?

Does this conflict reflect personal weakness or amoral genes? Should the messages of our libido be trusted, or are the genitals merely "the last refuge of the depressive," as a lover once suggested to me? Does intimacy—like any spiritual discipline such as meditation—require transcendence of natural impulse in order to reach another level of consciousness? Are we fighting a losing battle by attempting to spiritualize a physical appetite, promoting self-loathing through our failures?

Haunted by these questions as a husband and a seeker, I've been equally intrigued as an author by the bizarre and poignant stories

that men have told me (often, as on that morning in London, without my asking) about their earnest attempts to regain power over their sexuality. One friend took part in a men's workshop that included a ritual called Cock Talk, in which a group of men sat naked in a circle passing a dildo and talking about their relationships to their genitals. A later exercise involved breaking through a lineup of men, grabbing a pair of oranges (meant to symbolize my friend's testicles) from a man (meant to symbolize his mother), then holding the family jewels over "her" writhing body as she died of Jocasta's grief. Another friend told me about a workshop in which each man was

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male evolution, be as truthful as possible, and try to keep a sense of humor.

This is hard. Committed to a monogamous relationship myself, I'm often appalled by my own contradictions, the ways that my body conspires against heart and mind. Mostly, I'm in a quandary, caught between hope that I can transform my lust-machine into a vehicle of love, and utter pessimism that such a shift is possible. I seem to be in the majority, too: Most of the men I've talked to (and women, but that's a different article) report various forms of this same conflict, admitting that although they've mastered other major skills—professional, meditative, artistic, domestic—when it comes to

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called on to take out his privates in front of the group and speak to someone role-playing his female companion. "This is mine!" he said, reclaiming his penis. "You can play with it sometimes, but only when I say so!"

As funny as these games sound out of context, they're obviously designed to address a dead-serious problem involving men, sex, and power, and how this lopsided triangle blocks many of us from genuine fulfillment in our relationships. Here's my theory: In a rape-crazed world, where men are frequently stereotyped as potential abusers—and our sexual organs as guns, spears, or tools of destruction—it's not surprising that many of us feel secretly ambivalent toward our maleness, and long for ways to reclaim our virility. The phallus and its power have been worshiped and vilified by our culture but hardly trusted. Many of us have yet to learn how to fit the unwieldy shape of our sexual natures into loving relationship. In moments of frustration, I've cursed my own body for causing me so much trouble. Imagining women to be my moral and spiritual superiors, I've fantasized that if I were just concave instead of convex, freed from the predatory, forward-thrusting habit of my penis-mind, life and love would be so much simpler. Of course, this is ridiculous: Women have their own problems.

What might help is if our idealized view of erotic relationship could somehow accommodate flesh-and-blood reality. Romantic propaganda rarely allows for the kinks, ruptures, and animality that arise when two people pull the loose ends of their polymorphously perverse selves together to walk, however awkwardly, in erotic tandem. As Thomas Moore explains in his excellent book *Dark Eros*, "We do lust, we do dissemble. . . . Denial of these loves leads to a sentimentalized world, a split life . . . of maintaining impossible ideals and foiled with the incursion of repressed shadow." After years of such

internal repression, I've learned that the effort to tame, sanitize, sweeten, soften, or render acceptable this penetrating energy can easily paralyze desire.

I try to remind myself that one of love's primary gifts as a spiritual practice is that it is so terminally disillusioning, nowhere more so than around sex. Forced to accept the body's demands, we find that all heroic constructs, all virtuous fantasies, all grandiose dreams of enlightenment utterly fail. We're cornered into accepting animal nature for a reason: to ground us in humanity, to dispel ascendant fantasies of holiness or separateness, to do the long, amazing work of balancing apparently irreconcilable forces—imperfectly—within the space of a conscious lifetime.

That means accepting disorder and contradiction in ourselves and in our partners. It means letting ourselves get dirty when we need to and telling the truth about what we want. It means abandoning any pretense of propriety or piousness (a scary prospect for seekers who've spent a lot of energy becoming "better," more sensitive men) and remembering that Eros still follows his sister Chaos in the mythology of human behavior. It means appreciating contradictions, and the primordial force we'll never completely control, the wonderful, jagged part of ourselves that comes with being a hairy ape.

Today I'd suggest to that preppie producer that he try striking a bargain with his girlfriend, that she let Tarzan pound his chest a little between deep conversation and baby kisses (she might even like playing Jane). I'd remind him that God is wild, too, and that there has to be space for shadow play inside love's big room if we expect sex to keep breathing. I'd tell him what I remind myself in tortured moments: to stop fearing the gorilla man, to give him the benefit of the doubt. There's no sin in nasty pleasures.

Contributing editor Mark Matousek is the author of the memoir *Sex Death Enlightenment* (Riverhead). He welcomes responses and personal stories at [MMATOUSEK@aol.com](mailto:MMATOUSEK@aol.com).

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