



Professional Primates

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In the café car of an Amtrak train, a businesswoman in her fifties asked if she might sit across from me. It was a Friday evening. She, a senior manager at a Boston biotech company, was on her way to meet her husband and teenage children, who seemed to be, thanks to her high salary, enjoying life on a boat. Across from me she immediately opened her MacBook. She had to create slides for a presentation the next week.

On a napkin I scribbled a “Haiku to Businesswoman on the 5.35”:

the light from your Mac
is washing the color out
of a lovely face

I did not show her my poem, but there may have been something in my occasional glances. She took out her compact and redid her lips, and then, using the window as a mirror, ran her fingers through her expensively colored hair, trying to give it a little more life.

A few days later I read a *Current Biology* report in which scientists were describing the mating patterns of chimpanzees in a Ugandan national park. Male chimps, the authors proposed, prefer to mate with females who are 30 years of age or older. These older females are also more often fought over by males. Apparently, even balding 55-year-old females with worn and broken teeth are more appealing to males than are young healthy females. The authors proposed that the appeal of older females may be that they have been successful, both in surviving and in reproducing, in having and raising children. (A reminder of how science mirrors social trends, and of how social trends are rooted in economics. Now that we have a growing population of aging female humans with plenty of their own money and holding managerial jobs, we are finding that, even in the wild, even among chimpanzees, aging females are attractive.)

Meanwhile, in the café car, the businesswoman and I got into a good conversation about the differential abilities and performance of boys and girls at school and of men and women in organizations. Normally I would have proposed that she and I exchange business cards, continue our conversation on some other occasion. Although it is highly unlikely we would have had sex, we were well on our way to having the thought cross one or both of our minds.

But she was eager to meet her family for dinner and get on the boat, and I wanted to get to my New York apartment, my teenage son, my own bed and sleep. And my goals were being well met until, back home, around midnight, the college kids and med students once again began congregating in the park-like space surrounding my apartment building. Emboldened by alcohol, short skirts, breast flesh, the males were roaring, and the females, in their turn were crying out—attracting and fending off male advances. It was a while before security staff bothered to disperse the roving bands, whereupon I still had to fall back asleep. In the early morning hours, I heard the tender animal sounds of a young female—perhaps on her back, buttocks red, labia swollen—on one of the cement chess tables below.

Later that weekend I went to a meeting of a scholarly professional association. It was held in the apartment of one of the board members. I rode my bike there—six or seven miles. When I arrived—flushed from the exercise and with my backpack—the hostess said it looked like I had been hiking. Through the jungle, I might now say.

The association is open to both men and women and might attract equal numbers of both sexes. But associating—or at least meeting to plan future meetings and to discuss communication strategies—may increasingly be a women’s thing. And this particular meeting was being held on a fall Sunday afternoon—that is, on a football Sunday afternoon. About a dozen women attended, but, apart from me there was only one other man, and he a

jovial, soft-fleshed man, neutered by the fact that his chosen profession had been decimated by the Internet.

I quickly took my place in the living room, next to an attractive young woman. She was one of the few woman there who was still of childbearing age (or of what used to be called childbearing age). It is also the case that, because of how attractive I found her looks and demeanor, over the past year I had found various excuses for corresponding with this young woman by e-mail. But I had never felt it was quite appropriate, or that her interest was sufficient, for me to suggest a coffee. And for all I know she lives with a partner, be this person a man or a woman. And so what interested me then was how, when—with the Giants game about to start—I excused myself from the meeting, this young woman came to the vestibule to say good-bye to me, and in private.

May a reader of *Current Biology* reports be excused for proposing that when a viral male comes through the jungle to where females are gathered, it is for coitus. And a young fertile female understands this and presents to the male, and this even if, when the time comes, she is going to say she's too busy for coffee or, later, that the man has misunderstood, she wasn't interested in *that kind* of relationship. (Or in that kind of coitus.)

I was surprised and delighted that Ingrid, I will call her, came to say good-bye, but there was another aspect of my socio-sexual response at the meeting that surprised me more. During the meeting we were sitting in a circle, Ingrid on my left and across from me a middle-aged woman, closer to my age, already the mother of teenagers. Though their womanliness, their vitality was muted by her simple, comfortable clothing, the woman's breasts were ample, her hips wide. Naked, Elizabeth (let's call her) could have been a model for a fertility god. (That is, she had physical features that have long been associated with female fertility and nurture.)

What surprised me—what led to this piece—was that there seemed to be something in the social structure of this meeting, or in human beings' changing social relations more generally, that led my eyes to be drawn to this woman, Elizabeth, and that led me to think about her afterwards, and not in scholarly or professional ways. Yes, I never saw and have not cared to see the Amtrak senior manager's slide presentation, and I am here ignoring the intellectual talents and interests of the associating women and what they and I said about the scholarly projects we were working on—projects in anthropology, ethics, musicology, the psychology of art—projects that quite interest another side of me. A Freudian might speak here of sublimation, of how some of us (and even I, with a disconcerting regularity) rise above our animal instincts, using our libidinal energy for higher purposes. This would be to ignore how often such “sublimation” is not so much a rising above as escape and denial, a pretending to be other than we really are.

Yes, in addition to libidos and other instinctual drives, our species has some intellectual capacities. And these may, for example, allow us to observe, reflect on and write about our instinctual and emotional responses. And, as I have written elsewhere, even these seemingly intellectual observations are themselves instinctual and emotional responses, and



hardly less so because they are couched in language that seeks to hide or deny their true sources.

The night after that Sunday meeting, lying in bed, waiting on sleep, my thoughts came back to Elizabeth and my attraction to her, and then—unable to hold on to these thoughts or to do anything with half-remembered images—I slipped away into wondering about my seeming change of heart, of desire. I had always thought I was drawn to the slim-hipped and small-breasted, to a girlish demeanor (no matter the woman's actual age). Yet now there was Elizabeth and the

businesswoman on the train. Was it my newfound motherlessness, my aged mother having recently died? Was it economics? Women have long found older men who appear to have money or power to be particularly handsome, and even to like “rugged good looks” that seem downright ugly in lower-status men. Perhaps my eyesight had been now similarly reprogrammed; female money, status, and professional competence were looking good to me, sexy.

I recalled reading about other mammalian species in which the females kept together and the males wandered far, each by himself, a male only sneaking or striding (or bicycling) back when he smelled the females in heat or when he himself felt the urge to copulate or reproduce. A female might move to the edge of the group, where she could be most easily smelled or seen, separated from the rest, briefly taken by a lone wolf (or lone primate). In other locales—on the sidewalks of my youthful neighborhood, for example—one may also see queen females surrounded by several ladies in waiting. Alpha males have to push these others out of the way to get to the women they want, the women who, in a sense, are reserving themselves for the most successfully pushy.

I found myself reminded, too, of a real-estate transaction in which I had recently been involved. The real estate was, at least in some legal sense, mine, but the transaction was overseen by a host of women who had another idea. They would arrange everything and then I would sign. (Sperm become ink? And instead of trying to leave my sperm in the

vaginas of the attractive young woman and the fertility god of the professional association, I write about them?)

On the Web I have found a description of the various structures of primate societies, including “polygynous families” (a.k.a. “one-male-several-female groups”):

Mothers, sisters, and aunts act as a team in chasing off other unrelated females. They also collectively select their mutual mate among a number of potential suitors roaming in and out of their territory. The male that is chosen usually is one that does not act abusively towards them and is willing to cooperate with them in defending their territory. The relationship with any particular male may be short-term. The stable core of the community is the group of related females.

Not only the moral messages of our science, but also the social structures of we human primates seem to be rapidly evolving. Is the male-female partner-pairs model of the past several hundred years giving way to associations of women and lone males? I can imagine women losing interest in men, except insofar as some males may need to be encouraged to make deposits at sperm banks or to help in the fabrication and distribution of



vibrators and other sex toys. In a less extreme model, viral males will occasionally seek to raid the female associations and to try to carry off (or seduce away) one or more of the fertile females. These women may have brief careers of ecstasy and pain before returning back to the group, tails and tales between their legs. In a beehive, the female worker bees shift roles as they age,

at times nurturing, manufacturing, or guarding, at times taking out the dead bodies or going in search of nectar. Similarly, in my vision, once promiscuous human females shift to being mothers, lawyers, teachers, nurses, businesswomen and police—all the various roles needed by the group.

By the winds of capitalism and of less-human elements, we are swept along and through vast changes, driven here and there by forces much more powerful than any one of us and than all of us put together. And yet, being human, we persist in imagining we are making significant choices, that each healthy adult is capable of making significant choices. I

may choose Ingrid or Elizabeth, and Ingrid, Elizabeth or Sarah may choose me or choose to reject me. We amuse and soothe ourselves with our fantasies as a train rumbles down tracks that we ourselves have constructed with our own cleverness and sweat, and without knowing—usually without even thinking about—where we may really be headed, what ends we may in fact be serving.

“Oh, the places you’ll go!” Dr. Seuss once put it, optimistically. And I am reminded, too, of his Lorax, who spoke for the trees, as the Once-ler, with a surging enthusiasm and desperation, was destroying the entire forest, in order to make more and more Thneeds, “which everyone needs”. Oh the places we are going. And yet, even in our trains, our “monkey suits,” our meetings, parks, bedrooms, intellectual essays—it’s ever a jungle.

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