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Sex
Power
Money

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Heart of Darkness

My mum has a new boyfriend. He's called Geoff. I'm listening as he explains: 'I didn't have to pay because I made her orgasm.' I'm nine.

Geoff looks at me and then at my mother. I don't know which of us he's trying to impress but he's proud.

Geoff is using the word 'prostitute' in the easy way people did back then. If you say 'prostitute' now someone in the vicinity will be quick to correct you. They'll explain how the term reduces a sex worker's humanity and encourages stigma. Geoff didn't know that and nor did I.

'She said she doesn't usually cum with customers, but because I made her cum, she couldn't accept any money off me.'

My mum had told me previously, in a private conversation, that Geoff had quite a small penis. And if you're wondering how that's relevant, ditto, mate, ditto.

After Geoff had gone home the next day, Mum explained to me that prostitutes never orgasmed with their clients, they just pretended because of the fragile male ego. She told me that there was no way a prostitute wouldn't charge because they were excellent businesswomen and this was their livelihood.

I apologise that my mum is saying 'prostitute' as well. She's in the past when people didn't think about what they were saying. She would absolutely say 'sex worker' nowadays.

But sometimes ‘sex worker’ isn’t the correct language either. If a person has been trafficked, if they are a child, if they are unable to give consent – they ain’t working. We have to be careful with language because it creates the world. I recently heard a true crime podcast describe a woman being kidnapped and ‘forced into sex work’. I’m sure you’re aware that you can’t be ‘forced’ to ‘work’ – that is slavery, and when sex is involved, that’s rape.

I’ve been asked to keep the introduction ‘light’ so *shruggy winky emoji*.

Twenty-eight years later, I heard a comedian talking about PunterNet. ‘It’s TripAdvisor for prostitutes,’ she joked, then missed her bus home thanks to the queue waiting to tell her: ‘We call them sex workers now.’ I went on PunterNet when I got home. It was mostly men discussing the parking restrictions around sex workers’ houses. These men are breaking the law by paying for sex, but they’re only worried about traffic wardens.

PunterNet’s main page is basic and white ~~like your dad~~ with blue and black writing. There are no images. I felt safe to browse. There are reviews and message threads. I read a man’s complaint about a woman’s body odour and wanted to correct his spelling mistakes. I read a review that bemoaned that a woman ‘didn’t smile enough’. I thought this was funny. Men sometimes tell women to smile in the street or in a shop queue. Being told to smile has never made anyone want to. Do the men who say it know how much it pisses women off, is that why they do it?

I know it’s not ‘all men’ who do this, but it only takes a few busy men to mean it happens on a daily/weekly basis to ‘all women’.

Men don't tell other men to smile, they'd get punched. Telling another man to smile would insult his status, it would suggest that he's there to please you. That he's decorative. Telling a woman to smile does the same thing, but men aren't scared of women's punches.

HANG ON—

YES, sorry – women *can* be aggressors. YES, some women hit men. This is not a book about how women are always victims and men are always perpetrators.

When I was sixteen my mum had a different boyfriend. It was a complicated situation, he was married. Judge if you must; I certainly did. He would turn up at my house covered in what his wife had thrown at him, his shirts stained with food or smeared with condiments. The marks of her fingers on his face and neck. My mum would be kind to him, which disgusted me, obviously. His wife was a policewoman. She tracked his car. She broke into our house. She dragged him out of bed and beat him in front of my mum and sister. The people who are brutal and scary are created by more than biology.

So what I should've said above is: men aren't *automatically* scared of women's punches.

The result of evolution is that women *in general* are *on average* smaller and weaker than men, but it feels very sexist to say it. Like I'm criticising my own gender. Like I'm ignoring all the big strong women in the world and all the tiny men. No 'rule' about men and women is actually a 'rule'. It also sounds transphobic, or if not 'phobic' then at least trans-ignorant. Discussing sex and biology means stamping with large, insensitive boots over the fragile flower that is

individual human experience. There will be a lot of caveats in this book. And one tiny bloke.

Me?

Yup.

Going back to Mr Complaints on PunterNet, he's whinging, 'She didn't smile at me once,' and I think he's pathetic. He knows this woman does not want to have sex with him. He knows that for *absolute definite* because he is having to PAY HER to do it. This could not be clearer. He knows this woman doesn't want to have sex with him and yet he expects her to look cheerful about it? I am laughing nastily to myself, thinking, 'You can pay her to have sex with you, but you can't pay her not to hate you.' Do these men live in a fantasy world where they're Richard Gere in *Pretty Woman*? Have they tricked themselves into believing that despite being paying customers they deserve to be desired?

I tried to relate this to my life. Sex work is so called by people who recognise it as a form of labour like any other. 'Sex work is work is work,' activists and allies repeat and reiterate. It was Gertrude Stein who wrote 'Rose is a rose is a rose' but it was easier for her because no one disagreed and criminalised roses, making their already difficult life harder. The parallel I found is that I go for massages. A form of physical labour, provided by a stranger's body. I pay people to touch me. It's weird for me to assess it like that. I think about the interactions I have with professionals I pay to touch me; they ask me what I want from the experience, they speak softly and treat me considerately. How would I respond if they did not follow this code of conduct? If they shouted, if they put loud rap music on instead of goaty panpipes? But I

realise that while I understand consumer complaints, I cannot allow them from people paying for sex. I cannot correlate those things. In fact I worry that 'sex work is work' has made the people who buy sex feel even more entitled.

As hard as I try to understand the punters' point of view, they remain psychopaths to me. Unempathetic, selfish. They're all Geoffs, stupid, self-satisfying Geoffs. Have a wank, I think. Stop wanking in other people. This is a problem. I'm trying to write a book about how evolution moulded human sexuality – my starting point can't be 'male sexuality is essentially abusive' or 'straight men should all be in prison', although they are both things I have said when drunk. Researching this book, I've realised I am deeply prejudiced. Writing this book, I am attempting to confront that.

In my naivety, I have always wondered how anybody could be *aroused* by having sex with someone who didn't fancy them. All the sex I have had in my life AND I'VE DONE IT LOADS I've needed the other person to *want* to have sex with me. If you said, 'Sara, look over there, it's Idris Elba. He doesn't want to have sex with you. He thinks you are gross and smelly, but he *will* have sex with you if you pay him £80,' I wouldn't do it. Being desired is unequivocally connected to my arousal. The bad sex I've had, usually it's because I've felt the person didn't like me.

When I began researching this book three years ago, I didn't understand that some men become aroused *because* the other person doesn't want to have sex with them. There are delusional Geoffs who believe they're truly desired even in a transactional sex situation and there are also cruel Geoffs. Pain, discomfort or unwillingness turns them on. It makes them feel powerful.

The next post I read on PunterNet was titled ‘WARNING: TRAFFICKED’. It detailed a location, described a woman. Approximate age, assumed race. ‘Give this one a miss.’ The language was blokey and informal. The man believed the woman was not there willingly. ‘She could not speak English’ – matter of fact, not a complaint – ‘she cried throughout.’ I reread the sentence hoping I had misunderstood.

‘Throughout’.

He had done it. Finished. A weeping woman who couldn’t speak his language. Why did he consider this a ‘bad service’ rather than the violation of a human being? Why was he writing on a message board rather than reporting it to the police? Paying someone downstairs does not mean what he did upstairs wasn’t assault.

There are so many news reports of trafficking, a multitude of books telling the distressing stories of survivors. Why don’t these Geoffs care about that? How can any person buying sex be sure the encounter is willing? Do they reckon that as a ‘customer’ it isn’t their responsibility? Do they think money negates rape?

I’m supposed to be keeping this light.

My original premise, the provocation that led to my writing this book, was: what if, for some men, sexual excitement lessens empathy? Could that be true? There’s an old proverb, ‘A stiff prick hath no conscience,’ and I wish I could feel what it’s like to have an erection, if it does create a passionate mania that reduces the attached person’s humanity. But I have to rely on neuroscientific studies and anecdotal evidence. I read a brain study that showed people are less disgusted when aroused. The evidence suggested that when people are turned on they do stuff they’d never agree to

usually! This spoke to my personal experience of doing gross sexual stuff; it was true but I'd never consciously noted it. The study showed that activity in certain brain areas changed as the person neared orgasm. What if this also affects empathy? Later I explore the experiments on arousal and empathy and the existing evidence that supports and challenges my theory. I'll also investigate whether sexual psychopathy might have evolved to aid reproductive success in the chapter 'OH GOD MEN ARE HARDWIRED FOR RAPE'.

Don't get flustered, that was clickbait. Please cease free-loading the introduction and buy my book.

In October 2016 a video was leaked of the future president of the United States having a braggy conversation/admitting to the assault of women a decade or so before. We all know this recording off by heart. Trump says, 'I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything.'

I'm embarrassed to admit I believed his presidential hopes were over. In the 1980s Labour leader Neil Kinnock's political ambitions went down on Brighton beach when he did. If you're too young to remember this, you can watch it on YouTube. Kinnock was walking hand in hand with his wife when the sea surprised him and he tripped up trying to keep his shoes dry. 'That's it,' said the nation. 'You can't be leader, you can't even stay upright on pebbles.' When some American voters continued to respect Donald Trump, I realised I did not understand people very well. Or at all.

The discussions about what Trump had said were fascinating. Lots of people claimed it was 'banter', 'men's talk', 'locker-room'. What I'm expected to understand is that men in groups sometimes talk in a *special* way about women. It's

not supposed to be taken seriously, which is why they keep it secret. This is difficult for me to investigate: if I go to a locker room to hear men talking about women when women aren't around then I'm around, being a woman, and the 'banter' stops. The men revert back to being considerate humans telling me to 'cheer up and smile'.

I need to know why men behave differently in all-male groups.

We're just having a laugh—

Why do stag dos go to strip clubs?

Same—

Why are there so many sexual assault cases involving groups of sportsmen?

Bitches after their money.

EXCUS—

I'm winding you up.

The thing is, I LOVE joking, it's my profession. There's great difficulty in proving someone 'meant' what they claim was a joke. Jokes are usually monstrous. We laugh when intentions are clear, we laugh because we know it's pretence and grotesquerie. Yet even when joking, people lose their jobs for saying the sort of thing Trump did. But Trump wasn't in a telemarketing or admin role which he could be fired from. No one told him, 'We can't allow that attitude in customer service – you're dealing directly with the public,' because he had no one to answer to. Grabbing women reflected how powerful he was. 'You can do anything,' he locker-roomed

about his own authoritative position.

I was reminded of the *Ghostbusters* film, when one of the ghosts begins absorbing the other ghosts, sucking them inside him and becoming bigger and stronger and unbeatable. That was Trump. Rather than highlighting his unsuitability for democratic office, every uncaring comment he made built him up further.

Humans can't help but make quick, instinctual judgements about each other alongside our intellectual contemplations. Voters lost respect for Kinnock because he was overcome by gravity; because of his fallibility, because he seemed weak and jumpy at the foamy sea. Voters did *not* lose respect for Trump, because by being contemptible, sexist and cruel he seemed authoritative, a man who can grab women by their genitals without consequences. Trump perfectly personifies how a perceived dominance over women benefits a man's social position.

While people marched and tweeted and signed petitions about this new president over the subsequent months, I admitted to myself that a fear of male sexuality had made me sexist. That by late adolescence I thought of the male libido as a monster inside them, dormant and sleeping in some, shackled by the civilising mores of society in others.

That's sexist.

I said it was sexist. And while I was trying to work through this, become more reasonable and unbiased, the Harvey Weinstein stories started breaking. Woman after woman told the media what happened to them, and the journalists inserted 'alleged' because they didn't want to go to prison before he did. The world has many types of sex offenders. What appeared relevant about Weinstein was that it was his

position that allowed him to coerce, manipulate, assault, maul and rape. Allegedly. It was his powerful status that made his victims vulnerable.

I had a further revelation when the women who appeared to be friends with Weinstein, photographed smiling next to him at parties, were criticised. ‘They must have known,’ said the journalists; ‘why did they not stop him?’ Yes, Meryl Streep, this is in fact YOUR fault. Millions of rapes and assaults* every year and you’ve been selfishly dancing in *Mamma Mia!* instead of preventing them.

I am talking about this drunk in a cab with my friend Roisin. We’re debating the British comedy industry’s own allegeds. People don’t want to speak out because they’ll lose work, perhaps their whole career. People do not want to go to the police about the crimes committed against them because they are worried about everyone knowing, forever being a victim. The people who commit these crimes are always in powerful positions; they are the owners, managers, promoters, or the established and successful. Bill Cosby wasn’t drugging and assaulting Roseanne Barr. Kevin Spacey wasn’t molesting Sir Ian McKellen.** These people prey on their inferiors. No one is abusing up.

All predators have allies who say, ‘I can’t imagine that of him, he’s such a good bloke.’ People can’t help but presume the victim is lying, because it’s never happened to them. Weinstein is the perfect example – he didn’t do it to *everyone*. The men who do this discriminate. They often have women in their life they respect: wife, daughters, Meryl Streeps.

* Not all committed by Harvey Weinstein.

** Sean the lawyer has asked me to point out that Weinstein and Spacey are yet to go to trial and have both protested their innocence.

These women are ‘in tribe’, protected. I drunkenly try to explain my theory to Roisin and when I get home I write a Post-it in eyeliner: ‘IN TRIBE WOMeN = SAFE. OUT-SIDE WOOMEN = PREY’.

Human empathy has always relied on familiarity or in-tribeness and regularly fails when it comes to ‘the other’. I will argue that this has been moulded by evolution. ‘In tribe’ women’s fertility and attractiveness is owned and defended, while unfamiliar women are desired in exploitative ways. A perfect example is the kind of man who enjoys strip clubs but would be devastated if his daughters became strippers.

So stripping is exploitation?

Not especially and not necessarily; but as a transactional sexual behaviour stripping can be objectifying. It’s performative fantasy created by removing the ‘real’ person and replacing them with someone who wishes to wiggle and serve. It is often an interaction without empathy, and lust without empathy can be dangerous.

I wanted to understand what men like Weinstein are getting off on. I found research about the effect of social status on the brain and learned that neurotransmitters like serotonin are released when we feel superior. This means a chemical that influences our happiness and wellbeing is boosted by dominance. Perhaps that makes complete sense to you, seems obvious? It feels good to be respected and terrible to be lowly. In the ‘Sex Power Biology’ section I’ll outline some of the hormones and chemicals involved in human mating and bonding. We’ll then get into the politically incorrect terrain of considering power and sex from an evolutionary perspective.

Gaining sexual pleasure from dominating another is known as sadism, named after a French philosopher called the Marquis de Sade. De Sade was a violent predator and has many modern apologists. I angrily wrote a lot of this book about him, then cut it all. What remained significant was something Angela Carter insisted in *The Sadeian Woman*: that all sex is an exchange of power. A matter-of-fact theory that does not reflect my experience. No sex that I'm having feels like a power exchange. My sex is friendly and fun and between equals. As I explore transactional sex for the 'Sex Power Money Money Money' chapters of this book, I realise that the power dynamic within sex is more than topping or bottoming. If people want to have sex with each other for no other reason than sex itself, where is the power being traded? To be an exchange there must be inequality to begin with. Usually economic. This is true of marriage in societies where women do not have independent income; it is true of any partnership with a financial dependant. It is explicitly demonstrated by sugar-daddying, sex-for-rent and other forms of sex work. But I've become more interested in the less explicit forms – a kiss-and-tell scenario for instance. Or the cultural expectations that a man should pay for a woman's dinner, or that a woman should feel obliged to sleep with a man who's bought a lot of drinks.

I saw a quote from the film *Scarface* on a men's rights message board: 'When you get the money, you get the power. Then when you get the power, then you get the women.' I should've got Tony Montana to write the foreword because that's my basic premise. Montana is not a respected intellectual but as I researched the relationship between status and sexual access in human beings, I found evidence supporting

his proclamation. There are studies that show heterosexual women prefer men with expensive cars and designer clothes; that they find the same men more attractive when adorned with symbols of wealth. This relationship between power and attraction appears gendered; the studies did NOT find that heterosexual men prefer powerful women. Beautiful porn star Stormy Daniels had an affair with unattractive tycoon Donald Trump. No porn star has been wooed by Angela Merkel.*

To my surprise I found many straight women do believe it's 'fair' and 'right' that a man provide for them, that gestures of generosity are expected. I battled with this because I find it such a repulsive attribute, though as we'll discover, it reflects evolutionary logic.

I'll be honest, a lot of evolutionary logic has made me want to puke. I've written this book with the knowledge that all animals, including ourselves, behave in ways which maximise our chances of reproductive success. There are no morals, there is no intellectual debate, there is only the replication of genes, the spreading of traits. But I recognise why it's not a trendy approach for understanding modern behaviour. I understand why feminists and MRAs alike consider biological sex differences reductive and unhelpful.

Why?

Because people don't identify as animals! People would like to believe they're modern intellectuals making choices

* I'm so aware of the months that will pass between my writing this and it being published. So many ways to be out of date, but I will be happy to be proved wrong on this point if it's revealed that Merkel has been banging away with a multitude of young studs.

rather than bald apes responding to instinctual drives. We see stupid cows standing in fields without Netflix, we see dogs unashamedly sniffing each other's butts and we think we're something special. And we are. Giraffes have long necks, fish can breathe under water and humans have consciousness and the ability to reason. But that doesn't make us immune to natural forces and we shouldn't ignore our biology.

People talk about 'rape culture' and 'a culture of sexism', but I'm going to argue these things are not created by societies but remnants of forces going much further back. This book is my attempt to persuade you that an evolutionary approach can occasionally make the most baffling human behaviours less mysterious – from the popularity of pornography and our preoccupation with penis size, through to the stigma around selling sex. Biology is not a complete answer to who we are, but along with our childhood memories and Tony Montana quotes, it has the power to influence us.