

THE SEXINESS

Diane Sewell, a thirty-nine-year-old Atlanta wife and mother, was excited about going gliding for the first time. She expected to enjoy the view and the peaceful quiet of flying in a motorless plane. She even expected to be scared, and she was scared by the dips, dives and loop-the-loops executed by her stunt-loving pilot. But what she never expected during this potentially hazardous experience was that she would be sexually aroused. "I was totally blown away by the sexuality of it," recalls Diane. (All names in personal histories have been changed.) "The tingling, the blushing, the blood rushing to my genitals. It was the most sexual experience I've ever had without a partner."

We all know that sex can be risky. But how many realize that risk can be sexy? "Flirting with danger" is more than just a figure of speech. Risk can be an aphrodisiac, because the fires of fear and lust are stoked in the same furnace.

"An edge of anxiety can be highly arousing," points out Elizabeth Rice Allgeier, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, and president-elect of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex. "Anything that is arousing—including fear—

may be interpreted as sexual."

Megan Harris, twenty-eight, an urban planner from Chicago, discovered this during a weekend trip to the woods of Wisconsin. Soon after she and her partner Tom arrived, they saw deer and other wildlife, and remembered that they'd been warned about the proximity of bears. Late Saturday afternoon, Megan began to sunbathe nude on a strip of grass outside their cabin.

Tom stayed inside, reading. In the nearby woods, Megan could hear twigs snapping beneath the feet of hunters—or was it bears? She was afraid—feeling so exposed, surrounded by animals and men carrying rifles—and soon became aroused.

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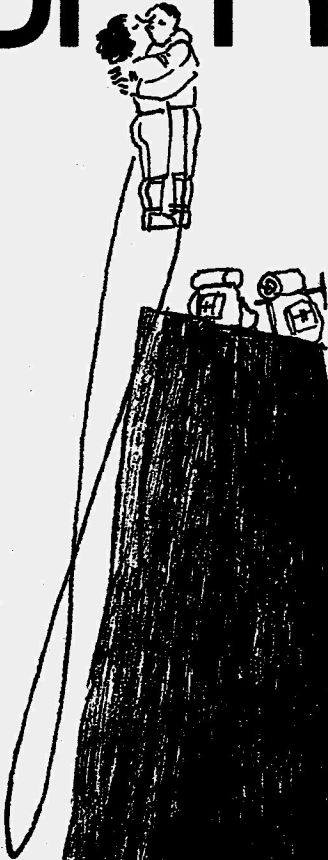
She opened her body to the sun's warmth and began to touch herself. When Tom emerged from their cabin and saw her, he quickly became aroused himself. Without a word they began to make passionate love on the ground. Throughout their lovemaking Megan and Tom could hear twigs snapping in the woods nearby, and were scared of being discovered by hunters or animals. "But we didn't stop," Megan recalls. "It was one of the most erotic experiences in my whole life."

Sex experts from Aristotle to Masters have noted that sexual responses can accompany fear. Robert Waelder, Ph.D., has described this process in *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*: "Fear develops as a reaction to danger, but it is seized by sexual drives and made a source of pleasure. . . ." In their 1948 case histories, Kinsey's researchers found that young boys got erections during such boyhood activities as looking over the edges of buildings, reciting in class or running from the police.

It is harder to assess the prevalence of a sexual reaction to danger among women. However, in a 1977 study at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, a group of women were fitted with vaginal probes and shown three movies in different sequences. The first was a frankly erotic film of a nude couple engaged in foreplay. The second, about an automobile accident, was fear-inducing. The third was a Nova Scotia travelogue. As the researchers expected, the women experienced a moderate sexual response when they saw the travelogue first, then the erotic movie. Viewing the auto accident film after the erotic movie quickly extinguished any sexual arousal. But when the women saw the fear-inducing accident movie before the erotic movie, they experienced peak arousal. The psychologists reported that their subjects "showed a higher level and more rapid increase in sexual arousal following anxiety arousal. . . ."

Many women describe erotic responses to such risky activities as skydiving, motorcycle riding or taking a corner too fast in a car. Psychologists have found that the minority of women who test high in the trait of "sensation-seeking" are not only likely to climb mountains but also to enjoy a rich,

OF RISKY SEX



IS DANGER THE BEST APHRODISIAC OF ALL?

Rock climbers, skydivers and gliders typically describe the "high" they get from their risky sports in sexual terms.

varied sex life. These sensation-seeking women judge themselves more sexually responsive than their more careful sisters. University of Wisconsin at Madison psychologist Frank Farley, Ph.D., labels such people "Type T" personalities (T stands for thrill), who seek novelty and variety in all

aspects of their lives, including the sexual. T-types report themselves as having sex more often, and in many more positions and settings than non-Ts.

Marvin Zuckerman, Ph.D., a University of Delaware psychologist who originated the study of sensation-seeking, has found similar results in his research on college students. He has also discussed how some sociopathic prisoners, who take

risks for the sake of sheer excitement, test higher in sensation-seeking than normal prisoners. Presumably one of their rewards is the stimulation they experience while breaking the law.

Dr. Allgeier once had a student who was sexually turned-on by stealing things from houses. "She would not only become aroused, but occasionally orgasmic, when she felt at risk of getting caught," says Dr. Allgeier. The woman finally did get caught, and in a series of conversations during and after a jail term, Dr.

Allgeier suggested to the student that her need for adventure be satisfied in other

ways, such as risky sports, that didn't violate the rights of others.

Something long known to men and increasingly to women is how

physically erotic risky adventures can be. Dallas actress Victoria Principal told People magazine that she began racing cars at the age of fifteen as a form of release from the confused sexual desires of adolescence. In her book Machisma: Women and Daring, author Grace Lichtenstein mentions Olympic skier Suzy Chaffee's discovery that (Continued on page 221)

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the excitement of her life as a "hot dog" skier could be channeled into sexual excitement. Lichtenstein also describes the powerful sexual reactions experienced by members of the first all-women's team to attempt climbing Annapurna in 1978, and notes that they satisfied these sexual desires with available men in "couplings on the road back from base camp . . ."

Weekend mountain climber Paula Gordon, thirty-five, says that her most passionate sexual experiences have always taken place during outdoor adventures. Paula remembers in particular the night a lightning storm erupted while she and a friend were camping in New Hampshire's White Mountains. "It was absolutely incredible," recalls the Boston graphic designer enthusiastically. "Especially when the lightning kept lighting up our tent as we made love."

Ever since she was nineteen years old, Paula says she has found that her love life is intimately tied to activities such as rock climbing, scuba diving, winter camping, skiing, gliding and sailing across the Atlantic Ocean. Paula enjoys these experiences in their own right, but especially likes sharing them with a loving man. As she explains, "If you've spent time with a person doing something strenuous, which also happens to be a bit dangerous, it's easier to get intimate. After you've had some really hairy experiences together, a kind of closeness develops you can't achieve any other way. It's very natural to respond to that person sexually."

Paula has particularly fond memories of two weeks she spent with a man hiking through the Grand Tetons, then scaling one of its highest peaks. After many heart-thumping, hair-raising experiences on the way up, the exhilaration and relief of reaching the top combined with the bracing mountain air made it seem the most natural thing in the world to make love beneath a blue sky in that cathedral-like setting. Paula can't resist calling this her "peak" sexual experience.

During fifteen mountaineering expeditions, Layne A. Longfellow, Ph.D., an Arizona psychologist formerly with the Menninger Foundation, has noted the unusually high sex drive of professional mountain climbers. Dr. Longfellow thinks this is due to both their superb physical fitness and their adventurousness, combined with the excitement of always being in life-threatening situations. As he puts it, they live "at the raw edge of vitality . . . They're pumping at a very high level all the time. I think the adrenaline rush, the surge, the titillation of danger does express itself sexually."

To test this hypothesis, a pair of psychologists in Vancouver, B.C., asked groups of men to cross either of two bridges spanning a river canyon in British Columbia. The first was a five-foot-wide suspension bridge that tilted, swayed and wobbled in the wind 230 feet above rocks and rapids. The second was a wider, more stable bridge further up the canyon and only ten feet above the river. Once each man had safely crossed to the other side, he was greeted by either a male or female interviewer who asked him to write a story and to call him/her later if he wanted more information. These essays were analyzed by judges who didn't know which bridge the writer had crossed. Among those men who had been met by the woman, the suspension-bridge group wrote stories far higher in sexual imagery than those written by men who had crossed the stable bridge. Half the subjects from the fear-arousing bridge called the woman later, as compared to only one-eighth of the solid-bridge cross-

were anxious and fearful after crossing the bridge, when confronted with the attractive woman, many interpreted the feeling as sexual arousal.

Any couple who has ever craved each other after riding a wild roller-coaster or watching a gory movie knows fear can be a form of foreplay. Embarrassing though it can be, we've all had frightening experiences, which, in the privacy of our nervous systems, turned us on. Although she blushes to admit it, Jeanine Calloway, a Minneapolis advertising executive, still remembers how shocked she was by her reaction to hearing of John F. Kennedy's assassination. It made her desire her husband so much that she called him at work and left her own job early so they could rendezvous at home. It wasn't that Jeanine was callous about Kennedy; to the contrary, she'd worked for his election and had loved him from afar. His death shook her and made her feel afraid—and feeling afraid made her want both the catharsis and comfort of making love with someone she loved.

Physiologically speaking, having a sexual response to fear is not entirely without a basis. In recent years, scientists have discovered that endorphins, natural opiate-like polypeptides in our bodies, are released in response to many different kinds of arousal. These "opiates" literally get us high. This could offer an explanation for why the arousal and excitement of danger could change into euphoria, which is probably due to endorphins kicking in. As a woman rock climber told San Francisco-area psychologist Sam Keen, for days after nearly being pulverized by a falling boulder she felt "sky-high, and lovemaking was just out of this world."

There has been speculation that endorphins may not only relieve stress but be connected with orgasms. Although no such connection has been proven, John Money, Ph.D., professor of medical psychology at the Johns Hopkins University and Hospital and director of its Psychohormonal Research Unit, points out that these brain chemicals "are found in high concentration in the vicinity of erotic/sexual pathways." If the high that endorphins produce is a common response to both fear and sexual arousal, then feeling turned on by danger is hardly surprising.

This news might not come as a surprise to those who engage in risky sports. Many participants admit indirectly that sexual excitement is part of their reward. Rock climbers, skydivers and hang gliders typically describe the high they get from dangerous sports in sexual terms, such as "sensual," "erotic" and "orgasmic." Groping about for a way to describe what she feels while skydiving, one woman finally hit on "an orgasm in the head."

Artists have long recognized the connection between danger and sex. Novelist Graham Greene has written, "fear has an odd seduction. Fear and the sense of sex are linked in secret conspiracy . . ." Movie-makers routinely marshal danger to create a sexual aura. In Peter Weir's *The Year of Living Dangerously*, the most erotic scene has nothing to do with sex *per se*, but portrays the growing passion of soon-to-be lovers Mel Gibson and Sigourney Weaver as they crash their car through armed roadblocks in strife-torn Indonesia.

Part of what makes sex so exciting is its aura of danger. The promise of risk is one of lovemaking's most potent lures. Just as a roller-coaster ride isn't nearly as much fun if you aren't scared to go on it in the first place, neither is the act of making love. One reason

far, of getting pregnant, of being discovered. In later years we remember those couplings in back seats or on living-room sofas more for the excitement we felt than the fear.

Some adults try to recapture that risky thrill of adolescent lovemaking in novel ways. One woman finds that she especially enjoys making love with her husband when they're visiting his parents, and her mother-in-law is sleeping just a thin wall away. Others find that having sex in potentially compromising situations revs up their love life. Asked about risks she enjoyed taking, one thirty-one-year-old wife and mother said, "Making love outdoors, risking discovery." For similar reasons, a fifty-year-old divorced grandmother reported how arousing she found it to make love half-submerged in the ocean with lifeguards and sunbathers a few feet away. A man in his late thirties recalled that his most exciting sexual experience took place in an elevator stuck between floors. Airplanes, trains, phone booths and the floor of an all-night grocery are other settings in which couples have enhanced their sex lives by creating a little risk.

Hope Callahan, a twenty-seven-year-old teacher from Albuquerque, says one of her most memorable sexual experiences took place in the camper cab of a pickup truck. The cab had windows large enough for truckers and drivers to see what Hope and her boyfriend were up to as they rode across Colorado. She recalls that the risk of being observed made this sexual experience a little embarrassing, but also "fun and exciting."

Something repeatedly mentioned by Hope and other women interviewed for this report is how attractive they feel—and find men to be—during strenuous, risky activities. Everyone looks better in the midst of danger. Once it's over, the tension of fear acts like a face peel, softening our features. At such times we're more appealing to others, and they to us. Bonds forged in dangerous settings tend to be unusually durable.

Paula Gordon, the adventurous designer, has found her relationships with men that involve sharing risk are not only more passionate, but longer-lasting as well. Paula recalls that she once deliberately took a new love interest hang gliding, hoping, as she puts it, "to scare the pants off him and have him connect with me." He did. After gliding together, Paula and her new lover developed an intense relationship that continued even after they broke up as lovers.

Sharing adventure not only contributes to sexual excitement, but can reinforce a lasting relationship. This does not mean that couples should be looking for planes to leap out of or mountains to scale together. Adventure takes many forms. Sharing the excitement of putting on a big play, working in a political campaign or starting a business can be every bit as arousing as the more physically dangerous types of risk-taking. Just as camping trips in the country can arouse passion among city people, visits to the city can turn on their country cousins. Risking your life is not the point. Taking some kind of risk, your own kind, is. Without the arousal of such daring, it's not just our daily routine that can go stale, but our nightly one, as well. ■

Ralph Keyes is the author of four books, including *Chancing It: Why We Take Risks* (1985, Little, Brown & Co.).