

BY DAVID MARSH

IN Plato's *Republic*, the elderly poet Sophocles speaks of his waning sex drive as an "escape from the madness and slavery of passion." At the age of 37, I am a long way from such comfort. The trouble is, my wife is already there.

This is not to say my wife has no interest in sex, it's just that her interest is realized only occasionally. Roughly once a month, coinciding presumably with her hormonal cycle. Again, this would be fine if I were like the elderly Sophocles. Trouble is, I'm the guy Camille Paglia was thinking of when she described men as blazing guns. Once a month I howl at the moon. The rest of the time I'm in a rutting frenzy. Once a day would be good. Twice, better.

That's not to say I can't control myself. I'm monogamous by nature and, along with the rest of my sex (regardless of what they may claim), I've learned ways to release the constantly building tension. Alone and in private.

But I long for something more. Millions of years of evolution have ensured that I will never be completely happy unless I get to actually do it with someone else. Even then, satisfaction isn't simply a matter of arriving at orgasm. Sex is a journey of mutual discovery. Truths are revealed. There is something about the intimacy of sex that lays open the guts and bones of a relationship in a way that watching TV or doing dishes together can never approximate.

Of course all these beautiful sentiments are moot if one of the partners is simply not into it. Desire is a fickle flame and therein lies the problem. If the one for whom your flame burns bright emits barely a flicker in response, it's hard not to feel a little wounded. Feelings fester and an unhealthy dynamic takes hold. I want sex. She doesn't. I feel rejected. My rejection turns to obsession. She feels pressured and even less inclined and the vortex begins to spin. Then my one chance in a month arrives and we make love on a tinderbox of expectation, frustration and anxiety.

It wasn't always like this. When we first met, we enjoyed each other as only new lovers can. Like bunnies. Hormone cycles didn't matter then. Sex was a giddy constant, broken only by work, sleep, food and the occasional movie. If I

could encapsulate and preserve one period in my life, it would be those amazing weeks and months when we first fell in love.

But I'm a realist. I know that kind of fevered obsession doesn't last. In retrospect I should probably be grateful it lasted as long as it did. In fact, were it not for the precipitous nature of the decline (that happened some time during our fourth year) and its unhappy conjunction with an ego-bashing foray into joblessness, I may not have noticed it. But of course I associated it with my recent failings and believed in my heart that she no longer loved me.

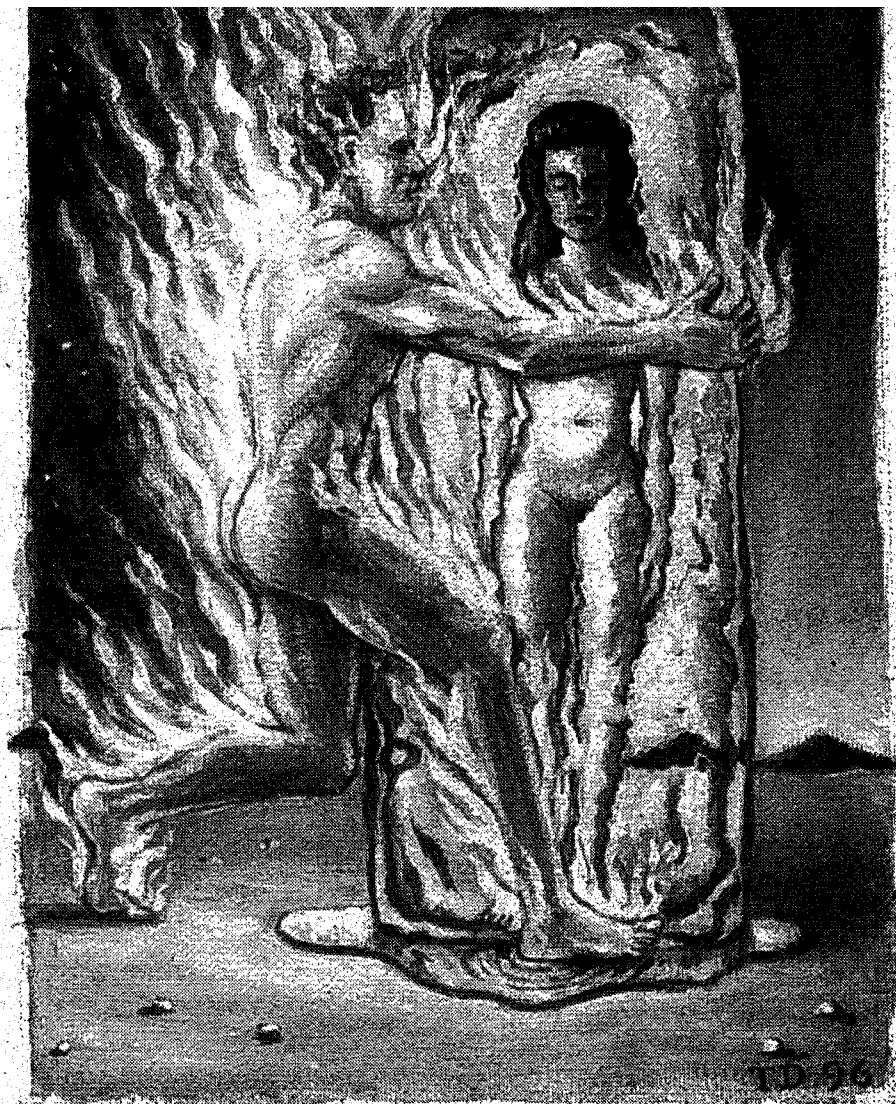
Several years later, we're still together and I no longer fear the loss of her love. But I've had to acknowledge that the love has changed. Where once we were lovers, we are now partners. It's a significant difference. My wife doesn't see this as acutely as I do. While she's aware that our sex life has faded, she doesn't mourn its passing. It's a change that suits her.

To her credit, she did try to accommodate me. She agreed to meet me halfway. Once a week. Four times more than she wanted, eight times less than I wanted.

But then there came the excuses. It's too late. It's too early. I'm menstruating. I'm ovulating. Tomorrow morning. Tomorrow night. Tomorrow. Tomorrow. Tomorrow. And let's not forget the charity sex. The resigned sex. The "you do what you want to me as long as I can read" sex. It got to the point where I was using my wife the same way Philip Roth's Portnoy used liver.

I sought counselling in women's magazines (men's magazines offered only short-term relief) and found that while many women shared my problem, the solutions they offered didn't fit. My efforts to seduce my wife failed to arouse anything more than suspicions. She would politely inform me that while she deeply appreciated the candlelight dinner and the fact that it was prepared in the nude, I still wasn't getting any nookie that night.

In desperation, I tried the reverse-psychology approach. Play hard to get. Make her come begging for it. I soon found out she was happy to employ the same methods of self-release that I had regretfully been forced to use. And at a 60-1 ratio, it would take five years of celibacy for her to experience what I went through in a



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single month. The old dynamic quickly reasserted itself.

Which brings me to where I am now. Of the five stages of grief, I'm at number four: Resignation. I know that no amount of cajoling, bargaining, romantic endeavours or simply being really, really nice to her will make the slightest difference. I will get laid once a month until her hormone cycle changes at menopause. After that... who knows?

This is not a terrible state of affairs. I have the comfort of knowing that she is not, herself, sexually frustrated. I can trust that she won't go elsewhere in

search of fulfilment. I also have the comfort of knowing that eventually I too will be released from the madness and slavery of passion. I will at last reach the final stage of grief: Acceptance.

But not a day goes by that I don't mourn the loss of what we once had. Like a blind man who remembers sight, I remember what it felt like to be lovers.

*David Marsh is the pseudonym for a man whose wife has assured him that she will never have sex with him again if he publishes this under his real name.*