

UNDRESSING THE AMERICAN M A L E

MEN WITH SEXUAL PROBLEMS AND
WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP THEM

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A DUTTON BOOK

C H A P T E R

Inexperienced and Inhibited Men

A few years ago a friend of mine tearfully confessed that although she loved her boyfriend, she was having a lot of difficulty dealing with the fact that he came too quickly. In an attempt to assuage her anxiety, I assured her that PE was a fairly easy problem to resolve. "There are lots of problems that are a lot worse," I told her. "There are even some men who can't come at all."

"Now that," she said with a sheepish grin, "is a problem I wouldn't mind handling."

Her response, though understandable, was naive. Inhibited male orgasm (it used to be called retarded ejaculation) may initially sound preferable to a problem like premature ejaculation. Unfortunately a man who has difficulty coming usually has a host of other sexual and emotional problems.

There are some exceptions. Every once in a while I come across a man who is socially and sexually healthy except for the fact that he struggles to have an orgasm with a partner. Obviously there is some degree of inhibition there but nothing that cannot be worked out within a reasonably short time frame. Many medications, especially antidepressants, also can have the effect of making it difficult for a man to have an orgasm. (Some

doctors are actually experimenting with Prozac as a way of helping men overcome premature ejaculation.)

But in most cases a man who has trouble coming with a partner carries lots of other sexual and emotional baggage.

MALE VIRGINS

I will never forget the first adult male virgin I worked with. Twenty-nine, he had emigrated from France ten years before and had made a good deal of money in the import-export business. He was tall and graceful. He parachuted for recreation. His demeanor was assertive, almost aggressive. His combination of success, intelligence, and, of course, that irresistible French accent made him quite appealing. Yet there he was: a virgin. This man of the world had never even kissed a woman, let alone had intercourse with her.

This man was a walking paradox, a contradiction, much like the terms "masculine" and "sexual inexperience." The two just don't seem to go together. We have been so socialized to believe that men should be the sexual aggressors that we do not consider the plight of those who are not. But if you think that the sexually inexperienced male is an oddity, reflect on this: There may be almost two million virgins over the age of twenty-three in this country right now.

Approximately 5.5 percent of men in the United States fall into the category of "never married." Researchers believe that half these men are gay. Half of the remainder prefer the life of a bachelor. And stunningly, the other half are virgins! If you add the scores of what I call psychological virgins, men with extremely limited experience and even less confidence, the sum is no small number of men who fall short in the arena of sexual knowledge.

These men are heterosexually oriented, although some have homoerotic thoughts as well as heterosexual feelings. They often want desperately to marry and have children. Sadly they are sexually and sometimes socially crippled. And the older they get, the

more crippled they become. What begins as simple inexperience can, if not resolved, become a tangled web of problems. Without the experience of being in a relationship, intimacy becomes an illusive and scary idea. In addition, the longer a man is alone with his fantasies and his own hand, the more difficult it becomes to have an orgasm with a real person of the opposite sex.

AT WHAT AGE IS VIRGINITY NOT A VIRTUE?

Nowhere does the double standard have a crueler twist. A woman who treasures her virginity in her twenties may at best be considered virtuous and at worst a little prudish. She may have some conflicts about intimacy or sexuality, but they do not stigmatize her the way they do a man. That is because once a woman is ready no longer to be a virgin, she only needs to give the cue, and there is likely to appear a willing teacher to help guide her down the path to sexual knowledge. It took one twenty-five-year-old sexually inexperienced patient of mine, who had a pretty face but was fairly overweight, a grand total of eight weeks to lose her virginity once she made up her mind that she wanted to.

A male in the same situation has a much more difficult road to travel. As I've noted before, our culture expects the male to take the lead and to be the more experienced sexually. So when he misses out on the normal courtship experience of the teens and early twenties, he usually runs into trouble. Ashamed of his lack of experience, he avoids women. The more he avoids, the more anxious he becomes, leading to more avoidance. Before you know it, you have a man who is headed into solitary sexual confinement. And unless he is seduced by a sexually aggressive female or gets professional help, he may stay that way forever.

MEN WHO SIMPLY MISS THE BOAT

What are these virgins made of psychologically? If they are young, it is often little more than an awkward adolescence marked by shyness and some conflicts related to body image.

You've Got to Be a Football Hero

Just as teenage girls are likely to harbor feelings of inadequacy if they fail to live up to the ideal of the cheerleader type, adolescent males also focus on their physical attributes as a way of measuring their attractiveness to the opposite sex. A socially shy teenage boy who also perceives himself as falling short in the looks department not only may miss the normal dating experience of adolescence but can remain stuck in the adolescent mind-set that says that physical attractiveness—not personality or financial stability—is the primary factor in being able to get a desirable female.

Richie, for example, was a twenty-four-year-old data processor who had been overweight as a child. In addition, his mother had always favored his two older brothers, leaving Richie with the underlying feeling that he was not quite good enough. Even though he now stood six feet one, was well built, and earned a decent living, he still felt inadequate, like the fat little boy he had once been. This feeling was coupled with a somewhat shy nature, which had prevented him from dating in high school, and a sensitivity to rejection that was reminiscent of his mother's early rejection. The result was that Richie missed both the social and sexual experiences he needed to develop feelings of sexual confidence. Now he was afraid that his lack of know-how would be the cause of rejection by a woman. He continued to hide out.

Men who are both shy and small in stature are ripe candidates for missing the courtship boat. Being short can be a devastating experience for a male, particularly during adolescence, when everyone, even the girls, are growing taller than he is. If a male is small and shy, the result can be a grown man who is convinced that his size is an unresolvable deficit.

Sean is a case in point of how the effect of being short can lin-

ger. When he first came to see me, he was twenty-four and a virgin. Sean was undoubtedly slight; he was five feet three although his body was perfectly proportioned. Although he was no Robert Redford, he was by no means unattractive. However, convinced that his height was preventing him from finding a woman he wanted to be in a relationship with, Sean was mentally stuck in adolescence. This became stunningly clear when I gave him the assignment of running a personal ad in the local newspaper. In his ad as well as in the telephone message he left for women responding to the ad, he mentioned his height first. Even more telling is what he failed to mention: the fact that he was a very successful art dealer and financially well off. When I questioned Sean about this omission, he seemed surprised. "I didn't know that money was so important to women," he said, a sure indication that he still viewed his own attractiveness by adolescent standards.

The most poignant case, and in many ways one of the most thrilling to see resolved, involved Dustin, a man who had missed the boat because of poor body image. Severely burned in a fire when he was four, Dustin went through his childhood convinced that he would never be normal. Yet, by his early twenties, after many years of painful surgery and facial reconstruction that occurred during adolescence, coupled with his ability to grow a mustache, Dustin looked normal.

Still, the scars of having lived through a childhood and adolescence of rejection by members of the opposite sex ran deep. It took many months of self-esteem building before Dustin felt comfortable just saying hello to a woman at the store or the bus stop on his way to work. It took him, given his devastating fear that a woman would say no, even longer to ask any woman to the movies. But Dustin has come a long way. He recently began dating a nineteen-year-old woman and had his first sexual experience with her. At twenty-eight he is accruing the experiences that most males have when they are eighteen.

Fear of Commitment

Sometimes, of course, the reason for a man's lack of experience may go somewhat deeper. Some men avoid dating in their teens or early twenties as a result of having grown up with parents who were unhappily married. Associating dating with getting stuck in a relationship, a man from this background may not experience much interest in having a relationship. His virginity and lack of experience become excuses for staying away.

Remember the father and son I mentioned in the first chapter, the two who were patients of mine although both used false last names and neither knew that the other was coming to see me? This was the case with the son. While Dad struggled with an erection problem caused by his castrating wife, the son chose to stay away from women completely. When he first came to see me, he was twenty-nine and had never dated anyone more than four times. Even though he felt sexually attracted to women and was good-looking, he began to understand that he had chosen virginity because he was afraid of getting stuck like his father. He came from a staunch Catholic community, where divorce was frowned upon, and therefore believed that once he got married, he would be "suckered" for life.

Usually through therapy a man like this comes to see that his father's life is not his life. He also learns that his father had just as much a role in allowing the mental abuse to occur as had the woman dishing it out. These realizations liberate an otherwise sexually healthy male to become sexually active.

In this case I was able to do better than that. Well aware of the father's inherent inability to stand up to his wife and equally aware of his son's influence on his mother, I suggested that the son tell his mother that unless she stopped demeaning her husband and began acting civilly toward him, he was not coming home to visit anymore. The strategy worked. After a no-nonsense talk with his mother she agreed to a cease-fire. Seeing his father's situation ease gave the son the go-ahead to begin dating. And while the father, whom I still work with, continues to suffer from an erection problem because he knows that his wife prefers not to have sex with him, he has told me that his wife has been much

less demeaning lately, although he does not have the foggiest idea of what caused the change.

Fear of Rejection

For other men, a hypersensitivity to rejection is what keeps them from gaining experience with the opposite sex. The sexy Frenchman I mentioned earlier falls into this category. His father had abandoned the family when he was a little boy, and since then he was terrified that he would lose anyone he loved. His fear was not of sex but of the dam of emotions that would burst forth if he became intimate with a woman. Therefore, he opted for many years to throw himself into his work or pursuits such as jumping out of airplanes, just to prove how unafraid he was. By the time he was ready to make his foray into the world of relationships, he was twenty-nine and a virgin and had to deal with an image that suggested that he was anything but sexually inexperienced.

Although the causes vary, the difference between the male who has simply missed the boat and the man who suffers from much deeper sexual, social, or psychological conflicts is that the former usually finds a way to get the experience he has missed during his twenties. And once he breaks through the barrier of avoidance, his sexual functioning, although in need of some fine-tuning, is fairly normal. Perhaps he initially has a few fluctuating erections caused by nervousness or an inability to figure out how to penetrate. He is also likely to need practice in the area of partner pleasuring, although many of these men are avid readers and conceptually, at least, know more about female sexuality than do men with other dysfunctions. Occasionally, too, he may have a short-term problem with inhibited orgasm. But for the most part a man like this usually reports that if a woman notices his inexperience, she generally does not comment on it or reject him for it. (Whether this is a testimonial to the power of instinct, or the general lack of lovemaking skill among young men, or women's inhibition about expressing what they want and need sexually, I have not yet figured out.)

It is not unusual for the man who has missed his sexual ado-

lescence to go on a sexual rampage once he has lost his virginity, trading in one partner for another in an effort to make up for lost time. I remember clearly, when I first began working with virgins, wondering if I had created a monster after helping Jerry, a striking-looking young man of twenty-five, overcome his social shyness. When I met him, Jerry was convinced that even though he no longer wanted to be a virgin, he wanted to have sex only with someone he was in love with. In time it became clear that this moral code was not really his but one that had been drummed into him by his mother, who had died when he was nineteen. Jerry, who described himself as always having an intense sexual interest in girls that he'd had to keep under wraps, thought that by allowing himself to have his own sexual mores, different from his mom's, he would be betraying her.

Eventually, as Jerry became an adult emotionally, he gave himself permission to develop values that he felt good about, including enjoying being sexual without having to be in love. I wasn't prepared for what happened next. By the time he was winding down treatment, this warm, kind, sensitive guy who had been concerned about not hurting the feelings of women had become a Don Juan heartbreaker. His weekends were spent at singles bars, picking up women—sometimes he even managed more than one a night—and taking them home for sexual experiences. When I questioned this newfound promiscuity, he told me that he simply was into being “with as many women as I can just to see the difference.”

Although I was less than thrilled by his behavior and about my part in creating it, I came to understand that for Jerry, as well as other late bloomers, this was a necessary step in reliving the adolescence he'd never had. He did get past it once the novelty of being sexual had worn off and eventually settled into a long-term relationship that, to my knowledge, he is still in.

Overall the prognosis is excellent, sexually and emotionally, for the inexperienced male who is still in his twenties and who more or less just missed the adolescent boat. Unless you meet him during his “making up for lost time” stage, you can be missing out on a good thing by rejecting a man because he initially seems shy and somewhat inexperienced.

VIRGINS (OR PSYCHOLOGICAL VIRGINS) OVER THIRTY

The same, unfortunately, cannot always be said of the man who has not resolved his inexperience by his late twenties. Not only does his continued lack of experience create many more obstacles to overcome to become sexually functional, but he is also likely to have much deeper conflicts at the root of his inexperience.

How does a man get to be thirty plus and still be a virgin or close to it?

The Socially Inadequate Male

About one third of the men I treat who are over thirtysomething and sexually inexperienced are paralyzed by shyness, lack of good social skills, and underlying feelings of inadequacy. Like the man who has simply missed the boat, he tends to be relatively free of sexual conflict and inhibition and can become sexually functional fairly easily—if he can get to the point of working up the gumption of asking a woman out and taking her to bed. Therein lies the rub. Unlike the man who has simply missed the boat, the socially inept male is plagued by a much more profound sense of social and emotional inadequacy.

- *He just seems, well, a little weird.* Not psychotic weird, but just off somehow. Being around him, you cannot help having the feeling that something is not quite right about him. Sometimes even the man himself is aware that there is something about him that people respond to negatively, yet he may be completely in the dark about what it is. That is because it is often elusive, hard to define exactly. The best way to describe it is a stiffness, a guarded unnaturalness with people. There is also often an incongruity in the person's body language—sitting in an “open” relaxed position with clenched fists, a smile that seems forced in light of the anger or otherwise pained expression in his eyes.
- *His general feelings of inadequacy are profound.* While

there can be brief respites in his self-denigration, his underlying feeling is that he is a loser. Most often this self-loathing is the result of a dysfunctional family situation. One man, for instance, who was born thirteen years after the next youngest sibling, described how his mother had always reminded him that he was an accident. Another told me how he had been hit on the head when he did not get good grades in school and subsequently developed a learning disability that further eroded his good feelings about himself. Whatever the cause, being around a man like this is uncomfortable because his negative feelings pervade his total personality.

- *There is often a history of substance abuse.* There is a very high incidence in this type of male of prior drug or substance abuse, including food. His shyness and low feeling of self-esteem are what lead him to abuse in the first place. However, once he recovers from the abuse, he not only is without the crutch of his drug but lacks years of healthy sexual and social interaction. Even if he has had some sexual experience, it is usually of little value to him because it was all “under the influence.” As a result, he may have only a vague recollection of it and therefore has little confidence that it has taught him anything of value. The upshot is that he experiences himself as starting from scratch sexually.

What is interesting about a man like this is how unconflicted about sex he frequently is. Once he gets some sexual experience, his functioning is frequently normal and in many cases, according to the reports of these men's partners, better than average.

His relative lack of sexual hang-ups and inhibitions, however, does not eliminate the burden of his social and emotional inadequacies. Considering his exaggerated sense of shyness and underlying feelings of low self-worth, it can virtually take years before he develops the skills and confidence to go through the normal courtship process of acceptance and rejection required to find a long-term relationship. All too often he gives up before he gets there.

SEXUALLY INEXPERIENCED AND INHIBITED MEN

Although the socially inadequate but sexually unconflicted male is not uncommon, the largest group of virgins and psychological virgins in their thirties or older are men who appear socially "normal"—in fact, they are often educationally and professionally well above average—but who have deep conflicts about women and intimacy and are sexually inhibited and conflicted.

Men like this fall into one of two categories: the intact heterosexual or the heterosexual with homosexual imprinting.

THE INHIBITED HETEROSEXUAL MALE

This man has no conflict about his sexual orientation. He is attracted to women, and admires them from afar. His sexual fantasies are always heterosexual in nature. Unlike the conflicted heterosexual male with homosexual imprinting, the avoidance of sexual contact with a female has nothing to do with a lack of desire for women or sexual feelings toward other men. Rather, he has tremendous unresolved emotional feelings about and fears of women that inhibit him from pursuing an intimate sexual relationship with a member of the opposite sex.

Dennis is forty-five, outgoing, tall, slightly above average-looking, and well above average in intelligence and success. Up to two months ago he was also still a virgin. If you met him at a party, you would not have even the faintest idea that there is anything wrong with him, although in view of the societal taboo against never-married males, you might question his longstanding bachelorhood and wonder if he is homosexual. But Dennis is not gay. He has never had a homosexual experience, and his sexual fantasies have always been of women. However, Dennis has lived the whole of his adult life in his own painful emotional world—one devoid of close relationships with women, and men, for that matter—a world in which he fills the time with

his career, his stamp collection, and his persistent and detailed sexual fantasies.

Dennis has spent a great many hours cultivating his fantasies by splicing together snippets of erotica he finds particularly pleasurable, creating, as he puts it, "the ultimate fantasy with the ultimate woman," providing him, when he masturbates, with "the ultimate sexual experience." He is not psychotic. He harbors great shame about these fantasies. At the same time they have provided him with a world without hurt and rejection as well as a way to escape his loneliness and depression.

Dennis, although somewhat older than most virgins of this type, is not atypical. He is successful professionally, has a perfectly normal social affect, and yet, because of many unresolved sexual and emotional issues, has never been in a sexual relationship with a woman. And although you would have difficulty detecting the problems that lie within when you first meet a Dennis or someone like him, a bit of probing into his history can give you some pretty good hints.

A Dread and Mistrust of Women

Almost invariably a man like this has a tremendous fear of, and often anger toward, women that comes from something having gone amiss in his early relationship with his mother.

Dennis is a perfect, although extreme, case in point. A few weeks after he was born, his birth mother left his father, his two brothers, and Dennis for another man. She was never heard from again. Dennis later learned that his mother had never wanted him. Impregnating his wife had been a ploy by his father to try to keep the ailing marriage together, a tactic that failed. How is that for role reversal?

Not only was Dennis out a mother, but his father didn't want him either. Inwardly he blamed Dennis for his wife's disappearance. He harbored a hostility that dug deep into his heart and later emerged in the form of unwarranted beatings. Also, Dennis's dad felt overwhelmed by having to care for his two other children. So two-month-old Dennis was sent to live with his aunt. He remained there for almost four years, and Dennis remembers feeling very loved and wanted. Then, for a reason that

Dennis does not understand to this day, his father decided he wanted him back, and took Dennis to live with him. So now there was another mother gone, another attachment severed.

Dennis's father eventually remarried. Mom number three was a nervous, rancorous sort, although Dennis recalls a fondness for her. Maybe she was not the perfect mother, but she did, when she could, try to stand between Dennis's behind and his irrationally irate father. Dennis's father, through a combination of criticism and emotional abuse, beat Dennis's self-worth into the ground. His stepmother, while not the strongest person in the world, at least tried to pick up the pieces.

When Dennis was thirteen and entering puberty, his stepmother was killed in a car accident. When he most needed a stable female in his life to give him the courage to enter the heterosexual world, he was again abandoned. When she died, a part of Dennis did, too. Dennis retreated into his own private world, where he was in charge, where he called the shots—where no one could touch him. He had been hurt too many times, left too often, to risk that pain again.

Although Dennis's story is unique and more dramatic than others' stories, it is far from extraordinary. In fact, it is uncanny just how similar the backgrounds are to Dennis's of men who fall into this category.

- *He has an irascible, cantankerous mother.* Many of these men describe their mothers as having portrayed noxious images of being a woman: nervous, high-strung, and abrasive. Although intellectually, a man might acknowledge that all women are not this unappealing, emotionally there still remains a fear that he is going to get "stuck" with such a creature.
- *His mother is emotionally unpredictable.* "I just never knew what kind of mood she would be in" is the way one man described it. "One moment she would be loving and kind, and the next she would be critical and rejecting." These mixed messages, this emotional push-pull, create a situation in which a young boy, desperate for Mom's approval, is emotionally at the mercy of a woman's whims—a kind of peren-

nial "she loves me, she loves me not" situation. The result is a man who needs the approval of women, but retreats out of terror of not receiving it.

- *This unpredictable, untrustworthy mother dies, often at a critical juncture in his life, thereby abandoning him.* This is a fairly common experience among these men and exacerbates the already profound feeling that women can't be trusted.
- *He doesn't have any sisters.* The man who is sexually inexperienced and inhibited usually does not understand women very well. For many, that is a result of having grown up in a home without any women besides Mom, leaving him with the feeling that girls are somewhat alien. And what one is not familiar with, one tends to fear.
- *He is actually or psychologically an only child.* In other words, even if he has brothers or sisters, they are significantly older than he, rendering him alone to wrestle with his parents.
- *He has a hostile father.* Although this is not always the case, it is often true. As a result, a boy grows up feeling afraid of doing anything that might make his father angry, including being more of a man than his father is. This can translate psychologically into a fear of growing up and becoming a sexually active male.

Emotional Characteristics of the Heterosexual Conflicted Male

If the histories of men like these are amazingly similar, so are their personality traits.

- *He has an obsession with the physical attributes of women.* If there is any certain sign of your thirty-plus heterosexual psychological or actual virgin, it is a constant preoccupation with the physical appearance of the women he considers dating. Sometimes you may even catch him staring at a woman he finds especially attractive. Although physical attraction is important to most men, it is uppermost to this

man. In fact, if you are not what society would consider well above average in looks, chances are you will never have the chance to become involved with a man with this background because he would never ask you out. And in the event that he did, he would end the relationship before it became emotionally serious.

Since he is likely to be of only average looks himself, to say nothing of his sexual inexperience, you might wonder how he has the chutzpah to be so picky. In reality he is stuck at an adolescent stage of development when looks are everything. He does not have the experience of having learned that sexual chemistry goes way beyond pure physical appearance. In addition, his overall lack of self-confidence only increases his preoccupation with appearances.

- *He is cool and compliant on the outside, a volcano on the inside.* Another predominant characteristic that these older inexperienced and conflicted men share is a seething, unremitting anger that is hidden behind a superficial guise of niceness, sometimes to a fault. You are always walking on eggshells with this type of man, except that you usually do not know it until it is too late. In therapy a man like this begins by always being prompt for his appointments and never complaining about having to wait. He is deferential, agreeing with almost everything, and smiles even when it is apparent he is in pain. Then, one day, seemingly out of the blue, he either does not show up for therapy or leaves a nasty message that he has decided to end therapy, without any explanation why.

The problem is that this type of man is not only supersensitive but also completely inept when it comes to dealing with anger. As a result, he abruptly cuts off a relationship when things do not go his way because he does not know any other way of handling his rage.

- *He is a control freak and has difficulty dealing with not getting his way.* The combination of his infantile rage at not having received what he justly deserved and an adult life spent alone doing things only when and if he wants to makes it hard for him to compromise. He is used to being in charge,

so any threat to this pseudo-independence is likely to be met with a great deal of resistance.

Sexual Habits of the Older Virgin

If the inhibited male has problems emotionally, he also has a number of sexual idiosyncrasies.

- *Late virginity:* This, of course, is the most obvious sexual aberration. Unlike young men who are a bit shy or who for other reasons have missed the opportunity for normal courtship of the late teens and early twenties, the older virgin has unconsciously avoided any opportunity to become sexual. That is why he ends up being as old as he is before seeking professional help. As ashamed as he is by his lack of experience, he is that much more terrified of having experience.

Unfortunately the lack of sexual experience with a partner creates certain patterns of sexual response that become problematic if and when he wants to relate to a woman sexually.

- *A dependence on masturbation:* While other men are engaging in sex with other people, the older virgin is engaging in sex with himself. And since this is the only outlet for his sexual feelings, he is likely to masturbate not only often but compulsively. Masturbation is enjoyable to most men. But to this man masturbation is not simply a pleasurable activity but a way of gaining emotional gratification and solace.
- *An addiction to a particular and often idiosyncratic way of masturbating:* The result is that a man becomes overly sensitized to the sensations he receives from his own hand, as well as to the perfect adjustments—faster, slower, harder, softer—that a person can get only through masturbation. He may also develop very particular types of motion, such as shaking his penis or tickling just the tip, to which he becomes responsive. He may also become used to masturbating by rubbing against a pillow or mattress. This is a sign of regressed sexuality as well as a problem in translating arousal to a partner.

- *An addiction to being alone with one's fantasies and lack of connection to another person:* Another factor that often makes the transition difficult from being alone to having sex with a real person is that for the whole of his adult life, a man like this has been arousing to a fantasy view of sex. Now, let's be clear about fantasies. The people in them are beautiful, or whatever the designer's image of beautiful is, do whatever their creator wants, and, most important of all, are nonthreatening because they never reject the fantasist. In a fantasy a man can do, be done to, or simply watch. Observing, in fact, is a common fantasy among men who feel sexually outside the mainstream. And the man who fantasizes can make his fantasy come and go at will. The result is a perfect, albeit noninteractive, sexual world that has little to do with reality and even less to do with the sexual and emotional interplay of actual lovemaking.

Sex After He Loses His Virginity

Considering his years of imprinting, it is little wonder that all sorts of sexual problems emerge once the older virgin takes the plunge and loses his virginity.

- *General lack of sexual finesse:* Although there can be a general sort of sexual klutziness, the lack of skill is most obvious when it comes to intercourse, particularly in the male superior position. These men frequently ask me, "How do I figure out where to put it in?" Older virgins have this idea, although I haven't the foggiest notion why, that a man, even in the dark, should be able to penetrate his partner in one deft move; that he should be able to take aim and fire his erect penis into the vaginal canal as if guided by radar. The words explaining to him that it is usual, even among sexually experienced men, for the woman to help guide the penis inside because the angle of the vagina varies from woman to woman are likely to fall upon deaf ears.
- Then, naturally, there is also an overall lack of ability that

comes from lack of knowledge coupled with some less than amorous feelings about certain female body parts.

- *An aversion to the vagina:* This is a staple among most men who have lived a life avoiding women sexually. It is true that we tend to fear things we are unfamiliar with. And to a forty-year-old virgin, the vagina, with its strange smells, textures, and hidden nature, is often a less than desirable part of the body. As one patient put it after I urged him to study a "beaver" shot at length in order to begin desensitizing him to his revulsion, "Well, it's not exactly made for aesthetics."

The result is that particularly in the early stages of his foray into the world of heterosexual sex, the virgin is likely to avoid touching the vagina or having oral sex. In some cases the aversion carries over to penetration, although his revulsion is likely to be less intense since he at least does not have to deal with the smell and can avoid some of the "sliminess," as one man described it, by wearing a condom. Still, there is no doubt that a man with this history has a special sensitivity to the vagina's every nook and cranny—how bumpy, wet, big, or warm it is. And a man's preference to avoid this part of the female anatomy makes partner pleasuring difficult, to say the least.

- *Castration anxiety:* Another striking quality of these men is a very real fear of their genitals being hurt. This comes out in all kinds of ways. One man told me that he was afraid that his partner, who was slightly zaftig, would hurt his penis by bending it if she were in the female superior position. Others, convinced that women will inadvertently hurt them, complain of anxiety whenever their testicles are touched. Obviously, if a man is concerned with protecting his genitalia when he should be focusing on feeling good sensations, his pleasure will be compromised.
- *An inability to arouse without fantasy:* A common complaint among women who have had experience with an inexperienced man is that when he is making love, "he is not all here." That's because he is often deep into the fantasy he needs to get and stay aroused. That is not to say that he will always have to rely on fantasy for arousal. But it is difficult

to erase the imprinting of twenty or thirty years without a protracted period of new imprinting to replace it.

- *Lack of sensation with intercourse:* The most common response I get from a man like this after he has lost his virginity is "Is that all there is?" In part, this is in response to the disappointment of discovering that the ceiling does not shake after the years of building sex up as something unattainable and otherworldly. But there is also a feeling that intercourse does not feel all that good, that there is not much friction. I call this the floppy vagina syndrome because so many of the men who have had this experience are convinced that the women they had sex with must have unusually large vaginas. In truth, the real problem is that such a man is so accustomed to the strong, perfect sensation of his own hand, or in some cases the feeling of rubbing against a pillow or mattress, that the feeling of coitus pales by comparison. Also, the sexually inexperienced man is often clumsy at intercourse at first and cannot coordinate his body to his best advantage.
- *Inhibited male orgasm:* As a result of his addiction to masturbation and his fantasies, his subsequent lack of strong sensation from penetration, and the underlying fear of intimacy that is commonplace among virginal men, inhibited orgasm is very common. The difficulty in climaxing is most pronounced with intercourse, although often a man like this has difficulty coming regardless of the type of stimulation in the presence of a woman—period. Not only is he unfamiliar with stimulation from another person, but he is also likely to develop a good deal of performance anxiety about how long it is taking him to reach an orgasm. "Is her arm, mouth, or pelvis getting tired?" he wonders. Naturally the more concerned he is about when he is going to come, the less likely it is that it's going to happen.

Can This Man Be Saved? A Prognosis

At this point you may be thinking that a man who falls into this category is a hopeless case and that pursuing a relationship

with him is a hopeless cause. But this often is not true at all. Over the years I have seen men like these get married, and according to their wives, they make good husbands. So what should you do if you meet a man who tells you he has never been married and whom you suspect falls into the category of the man I have just described? Should you write him off?

Not necessarily. If he has been heavily involved for a period of time in analytic psychotherapy and/or sex therapy in conjunction with a surrogate to work through these issues, he may be a reasonable candidate for a relationship, although if you meet him too early in treatment, he might not be ready yet. You will know if he has just recently begun to address these issues, as opposed to having resolved some of them, very easily. If he is early in the process, he will come right out and tell you. A man like this has a need to be totally honest right away about his lack of experience in relationships. A man who has worked through some of the barriers that have in the past prevented him from successfully pursuing relationships with women will not tell you right up front that he has zero or close to no experience (although if you start getting serious, he will tell you).

Also, he obviously has a much better chance of being a promising suitor if he is socially and professionally adept, but don't let the big bucks fool you. I have worked briefly with men of this type who are professionally successful but have extremely rigid and controlling personalities and believe that psychotherapy is something only for "sick" people. Individuals with personalities like this are difficult to begin with. Lacking the normal relationship experience that most people have by their thirties or forties makes them impossible.

THE INHIBITED HETEROSEXUAL MAN WITH HOMOSEXUAL IMPRINTING

The second type of the over-thirty virgin is the man who is primarily heterosexual in orientation but has some homosexual impulses to contend with.

How can you distinguish him from his hetero conflicted counterpart? About half the time he has an effeminate affect, although this varies highly in its degree. At one extreme there is the guy you are convinced is gay, even though he is not. I distinctly remember having to bite my tongue to contain my laughter at my first meeting with Evan. Slightly built and sandy-haired, his voice lilting, he gesticulated rather grandly as he confessed that he "just could not understand why I don't seem to have a way with the girls." While he is usually not this obvious, often something in the voice or the gestures makes this man appear slightly effeminate.

Just as often, though, there is a complete lack of sexual affect; "asexual" is the word that comes to mind. He does not seem gay or straight, but more or less neuter. Unlike the situation of the heterosexual inhibited man who may seem shy but who nevertheless manages to sneak a peek at women in that typical male-female way, the fact that I am female and he is male seems irrelevant when we talk. There is a complete lack of sexualizing, often because he simply does not consciously feel sexually attracted to women.

Other times the attraction may be there but so deeply hidden that you would never guess it exists. One man, for instance, a well-to-do virgin in his mid-thirties, went from nerdy in appearance when he was glum to adorable when he smiled. Still, there was nothing in the least bit sexy about him. I had worked intensely with him for more than a year when one day, as we were discussing the type of woman he would find appealing, he told me that he found *me* attractive. I was amazed and thought that perhaps this was a positive sign of his coming out of reclusiveness. But further questioning revealed that he had been attracted to me since we had started our work together, had even fantasized about me. My jaw must have dropped in amazement because he was stunned by my apparent oblivion. "Couldn't you tell?" he asked, both hurt and confused about why his interest had gone unnoticed. But the truth was he had not given me the slightest glimpse that this might be the case.

If you cannot tell him by his cover, his fantasies are a dead giveaway. Virtually every man of this type I have ever worked

with has conscious, recurrent homosexual fantasies. He often has heterosexual fantasies, too, but the mere existence of gay imagery when he masturbates has this man convinced beyond a doubt that he must be gay. After all, how could he imagine all sorts of sexual acts with a man and *not* be gay?

But he is almost invariably not homosexual. Go back enough in time, and you find that in elementary school he had the typical girl crushes that other heterosexual males have. But something usually happened around early puberty that prevented him from allowing his normal sexual interests to flourish, while at the same time encouraging desire toward males.

What kind of emotional backdrop produces a man with this heavy-duty confusion and conflict about his sexuality?

- *He has a very close, emotionally incestuous relationship with his mother that often, but not always, results from a physically or an emotionally absentee father.* In some families when there is no father or a woman feels emotionally estranged from her husband, she may turn to her son for comfort and closeness. A young boy may enjoy this special attention. He may even covet it.

As good as this intense connection feels, it becomes increasingly problematic. As a boy gets older and wants his freedom, he starts resenting his mother's reliance on him. Also, as he becomes aware of his burgeoning sexuality, the physical affection of a simple mother-son hug becomes laden with sexual overtones.

Now, what does an adolescent boy do, old enough to know that he is not supposed to want to go to bed with Mom, but with strong, uncontrollable yearnings in that direction? Particularly if the emotional boundaries between him and his mother are weak and his dependency on her is strong, he begins to shut down his sexual feelings toward women. The result is that this enormous faucet of heterosexual impulses, at their most pivotal point, is turned off.

Many men bury these feelings so deep that they remain forever lost. Even when their feelings can be retrieved in therapy, they are extremely threatening. That is exactly what

happened to a patient named Gus. Even though there was little doubt that he had once had strong heterosexual feelings, those urges were arrested as a result of a sexualized relationship with his mother somewhere between the ages of twelve and fourteen. The fact that his sexual development stopped precisely around this time became humorously obvious when Gus started having sexual feelings about me. He would sit in my office like a dumbstruck teenager, staring, admittedly, at my breasts, then my legs—giggling, no less. When those adolescent feelings began translating into actual fantasies, however, Gus felt so threatened by what he considered “inappropriate” sexual feelings that he discontinued treatment.

- *He has a passive or rejecting father.* This is where the homosexual element comes from. Every boy needs affection and attention from his father, and when he does not get it, the desire for male approval can become eroticized. Combine this with the need to negate his heterosexual feelings, and you have a situation that is ripe for the development of homoerotic ones.
- *He had a shy or awkward adolescence.* Many of these men describe themselves as having gone through a miserable gawky stage, marred by painful recollections of rejections by girls. Not surprisingly, the result is an ever-stronger desire to stay away from females and to seek out closer male companionship. And in light of the fact that during adolescence male hormones are pumping a zillion miles a minute, it is not surprising that sexual yearnings, even if not acted upon, can develop toward other males when females do not seem to be an option. These feelings are exacerbated when these pubescent boys, often for religious reasons, go to all-boy junior and senior high schools.

Put these elements together, and what you get is a male who is confused, sometimes irretrievably, about intimacy and sexual preference. One of my saddest treatment failures was with a patient who had this history. His name was Alan, and when I met him, he was in his late twenties, had a successful accounting

practice, and was a virgin. Two years later he was no longer a virgin, but he still could not muster the motivation to try to develop a relationship with a woman.

Alan was one of four sons, and he also had two sisters. Although he does not remember his parents' fighting much, he does remember his mother's continuously undermining his father for not making enough money. In addition, Alan's father was fifteen years Alan's mother's senior, so while Mom wanted to boogie, Dad wanted to sleep. His mother's unhappiness translated into an overzealous relationship with all her children, but most intensely with Alan.

By the time Alan was eight, it was obvious to him that his mom preferred spending time with him to her husband, that Alan was his mother's substitute spouse. At first, Alan remembers, he felt it was a compliment to be “Mommy's best boy.” But by the time he was ten or eleven, he began to feel burdened by his mother's complaints about his father. After all, he was supposed to be the child, not the parent.

The real breach with women came, however, when he was twelve or thirteen. His mother, while not one for parading around the house nude, failed to notice her son's normal prepubescent sexual interest in her. She made no attempt to cover up if her son was around even if she did happen to be in various stages of undress. As a result, Alan found himself masturbating to sexual fantasies about his mother. (Although many men with similar experiences do not consciously remember their sexual feelings before starting therapy, Alan did.) At about the same time the sister he was closest to, who was two years younger than he was, began developing breasts. So now he had not only one object of desire he felt ashamed about but two.

For all the emotional intensity Alan had with his mother, his relationship with his dad was devoid of feelings. If his father was too tired to be an active husband, he was also too tired to be a participatory father. “He was not mean to me,” Alan recalls, “but he just never was there for me either.” The lack of an adult male presence was exacerbated by his father's favoritism toward the oldest son. “He was always bragging about him, making comparisons between us. Nothing I ever did seemed to really matter to

him, even though I spent my whole life trying to impress him. I studied hard in school for him. I went to college and became a CPA so he would be proud of me. But nothing I did really made much of an impression."

The blend of rejecting father and sexualizing mother, combined with a nasty case of acne and a flat-out rejection by the first and only girl he asked out in his teens, made Alan's adolescence a nightmare. He was extremely ashamed of his sexual feelings toward his mother and sister, and he felt completely unattractive to other girls. He was, however, popular with his circle of boys and formed tight bonds with his male friends. This pattern continued through his teens. In college he became especially close to one of his roommates, and on a trip to Florida over Christmas break, it became obvious to both young men, neither of whom had ever had conscious homosexual feelings, that there were such rumblings between them. Alan never acted on these feelings, but they persist, to this day, in his masturbatory fantasies.

Alan buried his confusion in his career as an accountant for many years. But as he got older, the questions about his sexual preference greatly distressed him. In an attempt to make his foray into the heterosexual world, Alan went into a sex surrogate therapy program. It was there that he lost his virginity. It was there that he also learned that he could perform sexually with a woman, although, as he put it, "I was physically functioning but never really felt turned on."

The pattern continued in his few sexual encounters with women following the therapy. Not only did Alan not feel much excitement, but he began recognizing that he had some very strong negative feelings about having a close relationship with a woman. The one "long-term" relationship he allowed himself lasted only six months. He loved his partner, but the intense emotional demands placed on him by his mother, coupled with all the sexual conflicts he experienced, made the idea of a commitment completely untenable.

Alan and I were working on the sexual and intimacy issues when he lost his largest client and his accounting practice went

under. He is now thirty-three, and whether I can help him if he returns to therapy remains unknown.

CAN THESE MEN EVER BECOME FUNCTIONAL?

Fortunately not all men in this situation end up like Alan. I remember the thrill of getting a wedding announcement followed a year later by a birth announcement from a man who, like Alan, had homosexual fantasies and was a forty-one-year-old virgin when we first began working together. However, because of the taboo on heterosexual feelings coupled with the homoerotic feelings, learning to enjoy sex with a woman can be a longer haul for such a man than for the man who does not have homosexual feelings.

In some ways both types of inhibited man are sexually alike after they lose their virginity. Both experience vaginal aversion, although it is generally stronger among men with homoerotic imprinting. Both tend to struggle with having orgasms with partners because of a long-term addiction to masturbation. And both, at least initially, suffer from a lack of sexual repartee.

However, the man with homoerotic imprinting has additional sexual difficulties to contend with.

- *Since he cannot give himself conscious permission to feel attracted to women, he does not sexualize.* Therefore, he gets little or no arousal from touching a woman's body. This makes it harder for him to experience desire.
- *He is more apt to numb out chronically during intercourse.* The inability to function—that is, to maintain an erection while claiming to feel little or no sexual sensation—is common among these men. Clearly, his body is feeling good, but the feelings are so forbidden that he cannot allow himself consciously to experience them. Once again, the result is a man who can function but does not experience much sexual satisfaction.

- *He does not allow himself to fantasize because of his guilt about the homosexual nature of his fantasies.* When I work with a man with any sort of inhibition, fantasy can be a blessing because it can help circumvent the anxiety. But more often than not, men with homosexual feelings refuse to allow themselves to use their fantasies because they feel perverted doing so. This makes it much more difficult to resolve their sexual problems with women.

Ironically, the man who learns to ally himself with his homosexual fantasies rather than try to squelch them has a much better likelihood of resolving his sexual difficulties than the man who does not. Sexual imprints are parts of us. When you consciously try to shut those imprints out, you shut out your general sexual feelings. The man who comes to understand that his homoerotic impulses do not make him homosexual, and who begins feeling okay about fantasizing about what comes naturally to him when with a woman, starts having some pleasurable heterosexual experiences. The fact that he is fantasizing about a man does not detract from the fact that in reality he is with a woman. So over time what develops is an increasingly positive attitude toward sex with a woman, which, with patience, can turn into actual desire. Not surprisingly, while his sex drive toward the opposite sex is on the rise, his homosexual fantasies begin to disappear.

Because of these added difficulties, the prognosis is somewhat worse for this guy than the heterosexual man with no homosexual imprinting. And if a man has crossed the line and has actually had a number of homosexual experiences, the task becomes that much more difficult.

C H A P T E R

Unusual Sex

"What is the strangest case you have ever seen?" a friend of mine asked as we sipped margaritas at a favorite Mexican restaurant.

I had to think. The first person who came to mind was a man in his sixties, adorned with rings on all his fingers and strings of beads around his neck, who came to ask me if I could help him rebuild his sexual relationship with his wife. For the longest time, he told me, he had been rather fond of being spanked with riding crops, of which he had a vast collection, while stoned on cocaine. His wife had no interest in these activities whatsoever, so he frequented a number of dominatrices for his spanking pleasures. Still, he claimed to love his wife and wondered if, at his age, it would be possible for him to learn to enjoy sex without being spanked.

Then there was "Jenny," who was six feet two, wore a tiny pillbox hat with a veil, twittered down the hall in spiked heels and off-black hose with a run in the back, and had the hairiest face I had ever seen on a woman. "She" chatted nervously for about ten minutes in a lilting baritone about "her" inhibitions and confusion about sexual matters. Suddenly "she" stopped and lowered "her" head shamefully. "I don't know if you've figured this