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Hail the Returning Dragon, Clothed in New Fire

You know this love story. A gallant knight espies a fair maiden in the distant window of a forbidding-type castle. Their eyes meet—smokily—across the withered heath. Instant chemistry. And so good Sir Knight comes tear-assing toward the castle, brandishing his lance. Can he just gallop up and carry the fair maiden off? Not quite. First he's got to get past the dragon, right? There's always a particularly nasty dragon guarding the castle, and the knight's always got to face and slay the dragon if there's to be any carrying off. But and so, like any loyal knight in the service of passion, the knight battles the dragon, all for the sake of the fair maiden. "Fair maiden" means "good-looking virgin," by the way. And so let's not be naive about what the knight's really fighting for. You can bet he's going to expect more than a breathy "My hero" from the maiden once that dragon's slain. In fact, the way the story always goes, good Sir Knight risks life and lance against the dragon not to "rescue" the good-looking virgin, but to "win" her. And any knight, from any era, can tell you what "win" means here.

Some of my own knightly friends see the specter of heterosexual AIDS

as nothing less than a sexual Armageddon—a violent end to the casual carnalopia of the last three decades. Some others, grim but more upbeat, regard HIV as a sort of test of our generation's sexual mettle; these guys now applaud their own casual sport-fucking as a kind of medical daredevilry that affirms the indomitability of the erotic spirit. I cite, e.g., an upbeat friend's recent letter on AIDS: "...So now nature had invented another impediment to human relations, and yet the romantic urge lives. It defies all efforts—human, moral, and viral—to extinguish it. And that's a wonderful thing. It is, in fact, possible to be encouraged by the human will to fuck, which persists despite all sorts of impediments. We shall overcome, so to speak."

Cavalier sentiments, etc. But I can't help thinking some of today's knights still underestimate both AIDS's dangers and its advantages. They fail to see that HIV could well be the salvation of sexuality in the 1990s. They don't see it, I think, because they tend to misread the eternal story of what erotic passion's all about.

The erotic will exists "despite impediment"? Let's go back to that knight and fair maiden exchanging lascivious looks. And here comes the knight, galloping castleward, mammoth lance at the ready. Except imagine this time that there is no danger, no dragon to fear, face, fight, slay. Imagine the knight's pursuit of the maiden is Wholly unimpeded—there's no dragon; the castle's unlocked; the drawbridge even lowers automatically, like a suburban garage door. And here's the maiden inside, wearing a Victoria's Secret teddy and crooking her finger. Does anyone else here detect a shadow of disappointment in Sir Knight's face, a slight anticlimactic droop to his lance? Does this version of the story have anything like the other's passionate, erotic edge?

"The human will to fuck"? Any animal can fuck. But only humans can experience sexual passion, something wholly different from the biological urge to mate. And sexual passion's endured for millennia as a vital psychic force in human life—not despite impediments but because of them. Plain old coitus becomes erotically charged and spiritually potent at just those moments where impediments, conflicts, taboos and consequences lend it a double-edged character—meaningful sex is both an overcoming and a succumbing, a transcendence and a transgression, triumphant and terrible and ecstatic and sad. Turtles and gnats can mate, but only the human will can defy, transgress, overcome, love: Choose.

History-wise, both nature and culture have been ingenious at erecting impediments that give the choice of passion its price and value; religious proscriptions; penalty for adultery and divorce; chivalric chastity and courtly decorum; the stigma of illegitimate birth; chaperonage; madon-

na/whore complexes; syphilis; back-alley abortions; a set of "moral" codes that put sensuality on a taboo-level with defecation and apostasy... from the Victorians' dread of the body to early TV's one-foot-on-the-floor-at-all-times rule; from the automatic ruin of "fallen" women to back-seat tussles in which girlfriends struggled to deny boyfriends what they begged for in order to preserve their respect. Granted, from 1996's perspective, most of the old sexual dragons look stupid and cruel. But we need to realize that they had something big in their favor: as long as the dragons reigned, sex wasn't casual, not ever. Historically, human sexuality has been a deadly serious business—and the fiercer its dragons, the seriouser sex got; and the higher the price of choice, the higher the erotic voltage surrounding what people chose.

And then, what must have seemed suddenly, the dragons all keeled over and died. This was just around when I was born, the '60s "Revolution" in sexuality. Sci-fi type advances in prophylactics and anti-venereals, feminism as a political force, TV as institution, the rise of a culture of youth and its gland-intensive art and music, Civil Rights, rebellion as fashion, inhibition-killing drugs, the moral castration of churches and censors. Bikinis, miniskirts. "Free Love." The castle's doors weren't so much unlocked as blown off their hinges. Sex could finally be unconstrained, "Hang-Up"-free, just another appetite: casual. I was toothless and incontinent through most of the Revolution, but it must have seemed like instant paradise. For a while.

I was pre-conscious for the Revolution's big party, but I got to experience fully the hangover that followed—the erotic malaise of the '70s, as sex, divorced from most price and consequence, reached a kind of saturation-point in the culture—swinging couples and meat-market bars, hot tubs and EST, Hustler's gynecological spreads, *Charlie's Angels*, herpes, kiddie-porn, mood rings, teenage pregnancy, Plato's Retreat, disco. I remember *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* all too well, its grim account of the emptiness and self-loathing that a decade of rampant casual fucking had brought on. Looking back, I realize that I came of sexual age in a culture that was starting to miss the very dragons whose deaths had supposedly freed it.

If I've got this right, then the casual knights of my own bland generation might well come to regard AIDS as a blessing, a gift perhaps bestowed by nature to restore some critical balance, maybe summoned unconsciously out of the collective erotic despair of the post-'60s glut. Because the dragon is back, and clothed in a fire that can't be ignored.

I mean no offense. Nobody would claim that a lethal epidemic is a good thing. Nothing from nature is good or bad. Natural things just are; the only good and bad are people's various choices in the face of what is. But

our own history shows that—for whatever reasons—an erotically charged human existence requires impediments to passion, prices for choices. That hundreds of thousands of people are dying horribly of AIDS seems like a cruel and unfair price to pay for a new erotic impediment. But it's not obviously more unfair than the millions who have died of syphilis, incompetent abortions, and "crimes of passion," nor obviously more cruel than that people used routinely to have their lives wrecked by "falling," "fornicating," sinning, having "illegitimate" children, or getting trapped by inane religious codes in loveless and abusive marriages. At least it's not obvious to me.

There's a new dragon to face. But facing a dragon doesn't mean swaggering up to it unarmed and insulting its mom. And the erotic charge of hazard surrounding sex and HIV doesn't mean we can continue to engage in sport-fucking in the name of "courage" or romantic "will." In fact, AIDS's gift to us lies in its loud reminder that there's nothing casual about sex at all. This is a gift because human sexuality's power and meaning increase with our recognition of its seriousness. This has been what's "bad" about casual sex from the beginning: sex is never bad, but it's also never casual.

Our sexual recognition of what is can start with the conscientious use of protection as a gesture of love toward ourselves and our partners. But a deeper, far braver recognition of just what kind of dragon we're facing is now starting to take hold, and—far from Armageddon—is doing much to increase the erotic voltage of contemporary life. Thanks to AIDS, we're expanding our imaginations with respect to what is "sexual." Deep down, we all know that the real allure of sexuality has about as much to do with copulation as the appeal of food does with metabolic combustion. Trite though it (used to) sound, real sexuality is about our struggles to connect with one another, to erect bridges across the chasms that separate selves. Sexuality is, finally, about imagination. Thanks to brave people's recognition of AIDS as a fact of life, we are beginning to realize that highly charged sex can take place in all sorts of ways we'd forgotten or neglected—through non-genital touching, or over the phone, or via the mail; in a conversational nuance; in a body's posture, a certain pressure in a held hand. Sex can be everywhere we are, all the time. All we need to do is really face this dragon, yielding neither to hysterical terror nor to childish denial. In return, the dragon can help us relearn what it means to be truly sexual. This is not a small thing, or optional. Fire is lethal, but we need it. The key is how we come to fire. It's not just other people you have to respect. ■