

CHAPTER ONE

Animals

On the subject of women and sex, Meredith Chivers was out to obliterate the civilized world. The social conventions, the lists of sins, all the intangible influences needed to go. “I’ve spent a lot of time,” she said, “attempting to get back in my head to what life was like for proto-humans.”

When Chivers and I first met seven years ago, she was in her mid-thirties. She wore high-heeled black boots that laced up almost to her knees and skinny, stylish rectangular glasses. Her blond hair fell over a scoop-necked black top. She was a young but distinguished scientist in a discipline whose name, sexology, sounds something like a joke, a mismatching of prefix and suffix, of the base and the erudite.

Yet the matching is in earnest—the ambitions of the field have always been grand. And Chivers's dreams were no different. She hoped to peer into the workings of the psyche, to see somehow past the consequences of culture, of nurture, of all that is learned, and to apprehend a piece of women's primal and essential selves: a fundamental set of sexual truths that exist—inherently—at the core.

Men are animals. On matters of eros, we accept this as a kind of psychological axiom. Men are tamed by society, kept, for the most part, between boundaries, yet the subduing isn't so complete as to hide their natural state, which announces itself in endless ways—through pornography, through promiscuity, through the infinity of gazes directed at infinite passing bodies of desire—and which is affirmed by countless lessons of popular science: that men's minds are easily commandeered by the lower, less advanced neural regions of the brain; that men are programmed by evolutionary forces to be pitched inescapably into lust by the sight of certain physical qualities or proportions, like the .7 waist-to-hip ratio in women that seems to inflame heterosexual males all over the globe, from America to Guinea-Bissau; that men are mandated, again by the dictates of evolution, to increase the odds that their genes will survive in perpetuity and hence that they are compelled to spread their seed, to crave as many .7's as possible.

But why don't we say that women, too, are animals? Chivers was trying to discover animal realities.

She carried out her research in a series of cities, in Evanston, Illinois, which sits right next to Chicago, in Toronto, and most recently in Kingston, Ontario, which feels utterly on its own, tiny, and fragile. The Kingston airport is barely more than a hangar. Kingston's pale stone architecture has a thick, appealing solidity, yet it doesn't chase away the sense that the little downtown area, on the frigid spot where Lake Ontario spills into the Saint Lawrence River, isn't much more formidable than when it was founded as a French fur-trading post in the seventeenth century. Kingston is the home of Queen's University, a sprawling and esteemed institution of learning, where Chivers was a psychology professor, but the city is stark and scant enough that it is easy to imagine an earlier emptiness, the buildings gone, the pavement gone, almost nothing there except evergreens and snow.

And this seemed fitting to me when I visited her there. Because to reach the insight she wanted, she needed to do more than strip away societal codes; she needed to get rid of all the streets, all the physical as well as the incorporeal structures that have their effects on the conscious and the unconscious; she needed to re-create some pure, primordial situation, so that she could declare, This is what lies at the heart of women's sexuality.

Plainly, she wasn't going to be able to establish such conditions for her studies. Almost surely, for that matter, such pure conditions never existed, because proto-humans, our forehead-deficient *Homo heidelbergensis* and *Homo rhodesiensis* ancestors of some hundreds of thousands of years ago, had proto-cultures. But what she possessed was a plethysmograph: a miniature bulb and light sensor that you place inside the vagina.

This is what her female subjects did as they sat on a brown leatherette La-Z-Boy chair in her small, dimly lit lab in Toronto, where she first told me about her experiments. Semireclining on the La-Z-Boy, each subject watched an array of porn on an old, bulky computer monitor. The two-inch-long glassine tube of the plethysmograph beams light against the vaginal walls and reads the illumination that bounces back. In this way, it measures the blood flow to the vagina. Surges of blood stir a process called vaginal transudation, the seeping of moisture through the cells of the canal's lining. So, indirectly, the plethysmograph gauges vaginal wetness. It was a way to get past the obfuscations of the mind, the interference of the brain's repressive upper regions, and to find out, at a primitive level, what turns women on.

As they enrolled in the study, Chivers's subjects had identified themselves as straight or lesbian. This is what all of them saw:

A lush-bodied woman lay back beneath her lover on a green army blanket in the woods. His hair was cropped, his shoulders hulking. He propped his torso on rigid arms and slid inside her. She lifted her thighs and enwrapped him with her calves. The pace of his thrusting quickened, the muscles of his buttocks rippled, her fingers spread and seized his triceps.

After each ninety-second clip of porn, the subjects watched a video that sent the plethysmograph's readings back to a baseline state. The camera scanned jagged mountains and rested on a parched plateau.

Then a man walked naked on a beach. His back formed a V, and ridges of muscle angled toward his groin above his taut thighs. He flung a stone into the surf. His chest was massive. So were his buttocks, without a hint of fat. He strode along a rock precipice. His penis, relaxed, slung from side to side. He tossed another stone and stretched his spectacular back.

A slender woman with a soft, oval face and dark, curly hair sat on the lip of a large tub. Her skin was tan, her areolas dark. Another woman rose from the water, her soaked blond hair raked behind her ears. She pressed her face between the brunette's thighs and whisked with her tongue.

On his knees an unshaven man mouthed a sizeable penis that rose below a sheer, muscled stomach.

A woman with long black hair leaned forward on the arm of a lounge chair, her smooth buttocks elevated. Then she

settled her light brown body onto the white upholstery. Her legs were long, her breasts full, high. She licked her fingertips and stroked her clitoris. She pulled her spread knees up. She handled one breast. Her hips began to grind and lift.

A man drove himself into the ass of another man, who let out a grateful moan; a woman scissored her legs in a solitary session of nude calisthenics; a bespectacled, sculpted man lay on his back and masturbated; a man slipped a woman's black thong over her thighs and began with his tongue; a woman straddled another woman who wore a strap-on.

Then a pair of bonobos—a species of ape—strolled through a grassy field, the male's reedy, pig-colored erection on view. Abruptly, the female splayed herself, her back on the ground and legs in the air. While her mate thrust into her, his rhythm furious, she threw her hands above her head, as if in total erotic surrender.

Sitting on the leatherette chair, Chivers's subjects, straight and lesbian, were turned on right away by all of it, including the copulating apes. To stare at the data amassed by the plethysmograph was to confront a vision of anarchic arousal.

This was my initial glimpse of sexology's strivings after female desire. Chivers's husband, a psychologist whose thinking I'd sought out for another book about sex, introduced us. And

soon I was learning not only from Chivers but from many of the researchers she called a “gathering critical mass” of female scientists who were set on puzzling out the ways of eros in women. There was Marta Meana with her high-tech eye-tracker and Lisa Diamond with her low-tech, long-term studies of women’s erotic existences and Terri Fisher with her fake polygraph machine. Men, too, were part of the project. There was Kim Wallen with his monkeys and Jim Pfaus with his rats. There was Adriaan Tuiten with his genetic screening and his specially designed aphrodisiacs, *Lybrido* and *Lybridos*, that were headed to the Food and Drug Administration for approval.

And while they tutored me in their labs and animal observatories, I was listening as well to numberless everyday women who shared their yearnings and their bewilderment, who explained what they could—and couldn’t—understand about their sexuality. Some of their stories are laced throughout these pages. There was Isabel, who, in her early thirties, was tormented by a basic question: whether she should marry the handsome and adoring boyfriend she had once—but no longer—desired. Every so often, when they stood at a bar, she told him, “Kiss me like we’ve never met before.” She felt a reverberation, terribly faint, instantly fading. It mocked her, teaching her repeatedly: better not to make requests like that. “I’m not even thirty-five,” she said to me. “That tingling—I

don't get to feel that anymore?" And there was Wendy, who, ten years older than Isabel, had signed up for the Lybrido and Lybridos trials, to see if an experimental pill could restore some of the wanting that had once overtaken her with her husband, the father of her two children.

Others I interviewed—like Cheryl, who was slowly, deliberately reclaiming her capacity for lust after disfiguring cancer surgery, or Emma, who wanted our conversation to start at the strip club where she'd made her living a decade ago—don't appear in these chapters but invisibly inform them. I interviewed and interviewed and interviewed, hoping for yet more sight lines, and in the end, recent science and women's voices left me with pointed lessons:

That women's desire—its inherent range and innate power—is an underestimated and constrained force, even in our times, when all can seem so sexually inundated, so far beyond restriction.

That despite the notions our culture continues to imbue, this force is not, for the most part, sparked or sustained by emotional intimacy and safety, as Marta Meana would stress both in front of her eye-tracker and beside a casino stage.

And that one of our most comforting assumptions, soothing perhaps above all to men but clung to by both sexes, that female eros is much better made for monogamy than the male libido, is scarcely more than a fairy tale.

Monogamy is among our culture's most treasured and entrenched ideals. We may doubt the standard, wondering if it is misguided, and we may fail to uphold it, but still we look to it as to something reassuring and simply right. It defines who we aim to be romantically; it dictates the shape of our families, or at least it dictates our domestic dreams; it molds our beliefs about what it means to be a good parent. Monogamy is—or we feel that it is—part of the crucial stitching that keeps our society together, that prevents all from unraveling.

Women are supposed to be the standard's more natural allies, caretakers, defenders, their sexual beings more suited, biologically, to faithfulness. We hold tight to the fairy tale. We hold on with the help of evolutionary psychology, a discipline whose central sexual theory comparing women and men—a theory that is thinly supported—permeates our consciousness and calms our fears. And meanwhile, pharmaceutical companies search for a drug, a drug for women, that will serve as monogamy's cure.

CHAPTER TWO

Bodies and Minds

Chivers traced her love of collecting data back to her father, a Canadian Air Force colonel. With a master's in the field of human factors engineering, he created efficient cockpits for fighter jets; he studied reaction times to signals and how best to arrange a plane's controls. He taught her a reverence for the empirical. He plucked up a rock and told her about geological formations; he uncovered earthworms and talked about the aeration of soil. When the weekly TV section arrived with the newspaper, she underlined all the science shows. For her pet hamsters, she built mazes out of cardboard boxes. She settled on an optimal reward—the smell of peanut butter, she discovered, was too pervasive and confusing, so she used

vegetables—and ran experiments to learn whether the nocturnal rodents functioned more effectively and found a route to the food faster at night.

Down in her father's basement workshop, she learned to build under his watch and made a fridge with tiny wire hinges and a horse stable to go with the dollhouse he fabricated. She was entranced by the way things—inanimate and animate—fit together and operated; by college she was studying neuroscience, devoting herself to biophysics and biochemistry, when a friend suggested she enroll in something easy, a sexuality class. Six hundred students filled the lectures. One day the professor was showing slides. A vulva appeared. The ridges and folds of female genitalia, in tight close-up, took over the screen. Disgust consumed the hall, a massive expulsion of “Eeew!” that Chivers heard mostly from the women. A close-up of a penis caused no horror, no gasp, from anyone.

Back in high school, for a group of male classmates, Chivers had sketched the vulva's anatomy, a map to help the boys in finding the clitoris. Now, surrounded by the women's voluble wincing, she thought, This is the way you feel about your own bodies?

After the lecture course, she enrolled in a sexuality seminar. She gave a presentation on women's problems with orgasm; she played a video of a woman in her sixties talking about a

new partner, a late awakening. She led an electric discussion and left the room elated, but she couldn't conceive of any career dealing directly with sex, besides being a sex therapist, which she didn't want. Sticking with neuropsychology, she wound up doing a thesis experiment that added to fledgling evidence: that homosexual men perform less well than heterosexuals on a type of test involving three-dimensional shapes, just as females, on average, perform less well than males.

This bit of undergraduate research wasn't very politic. It fell within an area of science that is fiercely debated, mostly because of its signs that there are certain differences in intelligence between women and men due not to culture but to genes. Yet Chivers didn't much care about the politics; she was gazing at an intriguing nexus: between gender (the skill discrepancies between women and men at rotating three-dimensional shapes in their minds), desire (the similar discrepancies between gays and straights), and aspects of neurology that might well be innate. After graduation, she begged her way into an assistant's job at the Toronto lab that would later, after she got her doctorate, contain her cramped chamber with its La-Z-Boy and plethysmograph; it is part of one of Canada's most prestigious psychiatric teaching hospitals. When she arrived at the age of twenty-two, she was the only woman on the floor. Male sexuality was the sole focus of the science being done, and one day she asked the oldest

researcher, Kurt Freund, an eighty-one-year-old icon in sexology, why he never turned his attention to women.

Bald, with a bladelike nose and oversized ears that seemed to be sly instruments of detection, Freund, a Czechoslovakian psychiatrist, had been hired by the Czech military half a century earlier to catch conscripts who were trying to escape service by pretending to be homosexual. He'd developed a male version of the plethysmograph. This was long before a female equivalent existed. A glass tube was placed over the penis with an airtight seal around the base of the shaft. Images were shown. A gauge determined air pressure and marked the swelling. If, with a Czech draftee, the pressure didn't rise when Freund showed provocative pictures of young men, the conscript was headed into the army.

Freund didn't make a career out of hunting homosexuals. Early on, he tried to cure gays through psychoanalysis; eventually he called in his patients and gave their money back. Arguing that homosexuality arose from prenatal biology rather than upbringing, and insisting that it could not be treated, he fought Czech laws that criminalized gay sex. After he fled communist rule and settled in Toronto, his vision of male sexual orientation as permanent—and being gay as nothing like a sickness—helped to convince the American Psychiatric Association, in 1973, to strike homosexuality from its list of mental disorders.

Like all the researchers at the Toronto lab, Freund highlighted the inborn scripting of desire. Nurture was in constant interplay with nature, but it wasn't a fifty-fifty partnership. Answering Chivers, he asked a question of his own: "How am I to know what it is to be a woman? Who am I to study women when I am a man?" His words put her on the far side of a divide—a chasm, in his view. For her, they laid down a challenge. There were experiments to be constructed, data to be compiled, deductions to be distilled, results to be replicated. She imagined one day drawing a map that would capture female eros. "I feel like a pioneer at the edge of a giant forest," she said, when we first spoke. "There's a path leading in, but it isn't much."

In her sense of quest, there were echoes of Sigmund Freud, of his words to Marie Bonaparte almost a century ago. A great-grandniece of Napoleon, she was one of Freud's psychoanalytic disciples. "The great question that has never been answered," he told her, "and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is, What does a woman want?"

While they watched the clips of erotica, Chivers's subjects didn't just wear a plethysmograph; they also held a keypad. On this, they rated their own feelings of arousal. So Chivers

had physiological and self-reported—objective and subjective—scores. They hardly matched at all. All was discord. And this dissonance resonated loudly with findings from other researchers.

Women with women, men with men, men with women, lone men or women masturbating—Chivers's objective numbers, tracking what's technically called vaginal pulse amplitude, soared no matter who was on the screen and regardless of what they were doing, to each other, to themselves. Lust was catalyzed; blood flow spiked; capillaries throbbed indiscriminately. The strength of the pulsings did hold a few distinctions, variations in degree, one of them curious: the humping bonobos didn't spur as much blood as the human porn, but with an odd exception. Among all women, straight as well as gay, the chiseled man ambling alone on the beach—an Adonis, nothing less—lost out to the fornicating apes. What to make of such strangeness?

There was some further discrimination on the part of the lesbians. Over the series of studies Chivers did—to be sure her data were no fluke—they were a little selective; amplitude leapt more during videos starring women. Yet the lesbians' blood rushed hard during scenes of gay male porn. When Chivers analyzed the evidence, transmitted from vaginal membranes to sensor to software, when she set it out in graphs of vertical bars, the female libido looked omnivorous.

The keypad contradicted the plethysmograph, contradicted it entirely. Minds denied bodies. The self-reports announced indifference to the bonobos. But that was only for starters. When the films were of women touching themselves or enmeshed with each other, the straight subjects said they were a lot less excited than their genitals declared. During the segments of gay male sex, the ratings of the heterosexual women were even more muted—even less linked to what was going on between their legs. Chivers was staring at an objective and subjective divide, too, in the data from the lesbians: low keypad scores whenever men were having sex or masturbating in the films.

She put heterosexual and homosexual males through the same procedure. Strapped to their type of plethysmograph, their genitals spoke in ways not at all like the women's—they responded in predictable patterns she labeled "category specific." The straight men did swell slightly as they watched men masturbating and slightly more as they stared at men together, but this was dwarfed by their physiological arousal when the films featured women alone, women with men, and, above all, women with women. Category specific applied still more to the gay males. Their readings jumped when men masturbated, rocketed when men had sex with men, and climbed, though less steeply, when the clips showed men with women. For them, the plethysmograph rested close to dead when women owned the screen.

As for the bonobos, any thought that something acutely primitive in male sexuality would be roused by the mounting animals proved wrong. The genitals of both gay and straight men reacted to these primates the same way they did to the landscapes, to the pannings of mountains and plateaus. And with the men, the objective and subjective were in sync. Bodies and minds told the same story.

How to explain the conflict between what the women claimed and what their genitals said? Plausible reasons swirled. Anatomy, Chivers thought, might be one factor. Penises extend, press against clothes. Visibly they shrink and shrivel. Boys grow up with a perpetual awareness; male minds are used to being fed information from their groins. A sexual loop between body and cognition, each affecting the other, develops; it runs fast and smooth. For women, more covert architecture might make the messages less clear, easier to miss.

But were the women either consciously diminishing or unconsciously blocking out the fact that a vast scope of things stoked them—stoked them instantly—toward lust?

The discord within Chivers's readings converged with the results of a study done by Terri Fisher, a psychologist at Ohio State University, who asked two hundred female and male undergraduates to complete a questionnaire dealing with masturbation and the use of porn. The subjects were split

into groups and wrote their answers under three different conditions: either they were instructed to hand the finished questionnaire to a fellow college student, who waited just beyond an open door and was able to watch the subjects work; or they were given explicit assurances that their answers would be kept anonymous; or they were hooked up to a fake polygraph machine, with bogus electrodes taped to their hands, forearms, and necks.

The male replies were about the same under each of the three conditions, but for the females the circumstances were crucial. Many of the women in the first group—the ones who could well have worried that another student would see their answers—said they'd never masturbated, never checked out anything X-rated. The women who were told they would have strict confidentiality answered yes a lot more. And the women who thought they were wired to a lie detector replied almost identically to the men.

Because of the way the questions were phrased—somewhat delicately, without requiring precise numbers, Fisher told me, in deference to the conservative undertone she sensed on her satellite campus—the study couldn't pinpoint rates of masturbation or porn use; yet, she went on, it left no doubt as to the constraints most women feel about acknowledging the intensity of their libidos. When Fisher employed the same three conditions and asked women how many sexual

partners they'd had, subjects in the first group gave answers 70 percent lower than women wearing the phony electrodes. Diligently, she ran this part of the experiment a second time, with three hundred new participants. The women who thought they were being polygraphed not only reported more partners than the rest of the female subjects, they also—unlike their female counterparts—gave numbers a good deal higher than the men.

This kind of conscious suppression could well have distorted the self-reports of Chivers's straight women, but had it insinuated itself with the lesbians? Many of them might have adopted a stance of defiance about their sexuality—wouldn't this have lessened any impulse toward lying? Maybe, though with these women another sort of restraint could have been at work: the need for fidelity to their orientation, their minority identity.

Fisher's research pointed to willful denial. Yet, Chivers believed, something more subtle had to be at play. In journals she found glimmers of evidence—unconfirmed, insubstantial, like so much that she wished she could rely on, build on, as she attempted to assemble sexual truth—that women are less connected to, less cognizant of, the sensations of their bodies than men, not just erotically but in other ways. Was there some type of neural filter between women's bodies and the realms of consciousness in the brain?

Something tenuous about the pathways? Was this especially the case with sexual signals? Was this a product of genetic or societal codes? Were girls and women somehow taught to keep a psychic distance from their physical selves? Deep into our seven-year conversation, Chivers spoke bluntly about the congenital and the cultural, about nature and nurture and women's libidos. For a long while, though, she made no pronouncements. Her scientific intentions were aggressive, the stripping away of the societal, the isolation of the inherent. But she had a researcher's caution, an empiricist's reserve, a reluctance to declaim more than the data could support.

Fisher, meanwhile, was emphatic about the contortions imposed, the compressions enforced. "Being a human who is sexual," she said, "who is *allowed* to be sexual, is a freedom accorded by society much more readily to males than to females." Her lie detector was unequivocal.

Rebecca was a forty-two-year-old elementary school music teacher with three children. One afternoon, on the computer she shared with her husband, she discovered a picture of a woman who was plainly his lover. In all sorts of ways, this was devastating. There was the difference in age between the two women, clear to Rebecca immediately. More particularly and

insidiously, there were the woman's breasts, exposed in the photograph and, in Rebecca's eyes, significantly superior to her own, which had shrunk, she was sure, more than most do from nursing. And then there was her sense— instantaneous—that her husband wanted the photo to be found and the affair to be found out, because he hadn't had the courage to end the marriage and move in with the woman—who was blowing a whimsical kiss from the screen— without some mayhem to camouflage the long premeditation of his escape. Obeying a therapist's advice, Rebecca tried not to beg her husband to stay. She lobbied through friends. She gave her husband a book about seeking spiritual fulfillment instead of chasing new love. But within weeks, she was a single mother who spent a good amount of time in front of the computer, comparing herself to the seminude picture, which she'd forwarded to her own email address.

Rebecca—who was among the women I spent my time talking with, questioning relentlessly—had a talent for self-disparagement. This encompassed everything from her body to her career. How had she wound up teaching flute and clarinet to fourth-graders and never performing herself except during the intermissions at her students' recitals? And how, she wondered further, had she managed to corner herself into this marmish existence in, of all places, Portland, Oregon, America's city of hipsters?

Yet her skill at self-denigration was matched by a fiery resilience. Increasingly, on her screen the image of the twenty-nine-year-old girlfriend was replaced by the home site of an Internet dating service.

Gradually she had some dates. And gradually there was a man she saw as attractive and felt was kind, and—even before they slept together—she confided, over dinner in a Thai restaurant, something that had taken her fourteen years to tell her husband. She wanted to have a threesome with a woman. The discord and dissembling that ran through Chivers's and Fisher's findings weren't her issues. Why she'd waited so long to raise her desire with her husband she wasn't certain. Yes, some shyness was involved, but she guessed it had more to do with a hunch that turned out to be prescient: he didn't show any interest. Probably, she thought, this was because having another woman in their bed would have made a glaring reality out of his lack of interest in Rebecca herself. In any case, her date agreed that a threesome would be good. They abandoned the topic there, began sleeping together, and returned to the subject a few months later. She said that she would leave the arrangements to him.

He asked whether she had any criteria. She'd never been with a woman in a threesome or in any other way. Her wishes were specific. Hair color different from her own. Not too tall. In decent shape. White or Latina. And—a factor she'd been

fixated on for years—large breasts. C-cups, at a minimum, as long as they were real.

She and her boyfriend joked that she was as male as any caricature of a man. Because he'd never done anything like this before, it took him a while, but eventually he presented her with possibilities. He showed her a photograph from a casual connections site, a woman Rebecca found herself fantasizing about right away. But the emailing with this candidate flickered, and the chance faded. They debated whether to hire an escort. Periodically during this process of false starts, Rebecca was seized by fear: what if the woman saw her as old, repellent? But her boyfriend reassured her, and her desire was louder in her mind than her worry, and as they shifted toward the idea of renting someone, she reminded herself that her own attractiveness simply wasn't supposed to matter.

At last, with a babysitter taking care of her children, they waited at his apartment for the arrival of an escort he'd chosen from row after row of thumbnail images online. Wanting to be welcoming hosts and to soften the prostitution-like aspects of hiring a prostitute, they had lit tea candles and chilled a nice bottle of wine. When the escort rang the doorbell, though, and when Rebecca and her boyfriend glanced out the living room window, the harsher qualities of the situation became more difficult to ignore.

Despite her high price, the woman was homely and built

along the lines of a lumpy block. Rebecca whispered to her boyfriend that maybe the homeliness was due to the glare of his porch light, that all would be okay once they opened the door and began. She felt relieved, meanwhile, that she wouldn't have to be concerned about her own looks. But when they opened the door and the escort stepped quietly, even timidly, into the vestibule, with the manner more of a housemaid than a call girl, the trouble did not improve. The woman appeared to be around ten years older than Rebecca. And now Rebecca was calculating at rapid speed whether she should and could go through with this to spare the prostitute's feelings, so that the problem was no longer how to soften the exploitation of a body but how to avoid letting this woman know that her body was unexploitable.

Rebecca all but prayed that her boyfriend would somehow solve everything. He told the escort that Rebecca had suddenly come down with something, that she wasn't up to it, an excuse that sounded about as convincing as her fourth-graders' explanations for not practicing their instruments, though the woman, who smiled graciously, seemed to accept the reason or, either way, to be grateful not to have to perform. He gave her some minor cash for her time, and Rebecca said good-bye in sweet tones, and she and her boyfriend went upstairs to click on his computer and stare for a few moments in befuddlement at the immense disparity between the picture and

the person and to discuss the mystery of how other customers had handled this difference and whether it was a common dilemma in securing an escort and how you were supposed to prevent this from happening. "I think you just have to spend more," Rebecca said.

So they did. The second woman was pretty and young. She, too, was at odds with her picture, but not drastically, and Rebecca immersed herself in the escort's breasts, in her thighs, in her lips, in all the parts that had been paid for, lost herself in the textures and sights and smells, and was nearly euphoric afterward, both because, after years and years of yearning, she'd broken through the range of barriers that stood between her and another woman's body and lost her virginity in this sense and because, leaving the breakthrough aside, there'd been such pleasure in having, among other things, the prostitute's nipples in her mouth.

When Rebecca and I talked, she said that while she hoped for another threesome with a woman soon and might like to have a woman alone, she didn't much think of herself as a lesbian nor really as bisexual. She had no doubt that she preferred the romantic company of men. She fantasized mostly about men, was still happily with the same boyfriend, and definitely wouldn't want to replace him with a woman. I described Chivers's plethysmographic readings and asked for her thoughts.

The results didn't mean that women secretly want to have sex with bonobos, she began, laughing. And it might not be right to label most women as bi, even if lots of women, like her, did wish to have sex with women or would if they permitted themselves to know it. "It's hard to find the right words," she said. "The phrase that keeps coming into my head is that it's like a pregnancy of wanting. Pregnancy's not a good word—because it means pregnancy. It's that it's always there. Or always ready. And so much can set it off. Things you actually want and things you don't. Pregnant. Full. The pregnancy of women's desire. That's the best I can do."

Stranger. Close friend. Lover of long-standing.

This was the focus of a new experiment Chivers was finishing during one of my visits. The results made her pulse quicken.

It didn't race all that often. The daily labors of her research were painstaking; her office in Kingston was about as spare as a monk's cell. The cinder-block walls were nearly bare. Taped above her desk were a few splotches of purple and green painted by her toddler son. On the opposite wall was a small photographic triptych she'd taken of stone carvings at an Indian temple. A man, in the first image, had sex with