

# Anatomy of Love

The Natural  
History of  
Monogamy,  
Adultery,  
and Divorce

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## Infatuation

*Why Him? Why Her?*

*The meeting of two personalities is  
like the contact of two chemical substances;  
if there is any reaction,  
both are transformed.*

—Carl Jung

Almost everybody knows what infatuation feels like. That euphoria. That torment. Those sleepless nights and restless days. Awash in ecstasy or apprehension, you daydream during class or business, forget your coat, drive past your turn, sit by the phone, or plan what you will say—obsessed, longing for the next encounter with “him” or “her.” Then, when you meet again, his slightest gesture stops your pulse. Her laugh dizzies you. You take foolish risks, say stupid things, laugh too hard, reveal dark secrets, talk all night, walk at dawn, and often hug and kiss—oblivious to all the world as you tumble through a fever, breathless, etherized by bliss.

Despite thousands of poems, songs, books, operas, dramas, myths, and legends that have portrayed infatuation since before the time of Christ, despite the countless times a man or woman has deserted family and friends, committed suicide or homicide, or pined away because of love, few scientists have given this passion the study it deserves. Sigmund Freud dismissed infatuation as a blocked or delayed sex urge. Havelock Ellis called romantic attraction "sex-plus-friendship," an unconvincing description of this fever. And many people assume that infatuation is a mystical, intangible, inexplicable, even sacred experience that defies the laws of nature and the scrutiny of science. Hundreds of academics and philosophers mention infatuation in passing; few have tried to understand this animal attraction to another human being.

### *Falling in Love*

One telling dissection of this madness, however, is found in *Love and Limerence*, by psychologist Dorothy Tennov.<sup>2</sup>

In the mid-1960s Tennov devised approximately two hundred statements about romantic love and asked four hundred men and women at and around the University of Bridgeport, in Connecticut, to respond with "true" or "false" reactions. Hundreds of additional individuals answered subsequent versions of her questionnaire. From their responses, as well as their diaries and other personal accounts, Tennov identified a constellation of characteristics common to this condition of "being in love," a state she calls limerence, which some psychiatrists call attraction and I will call infatuation.

The first dramatic aspect of this condition is its inception, the moment when another person begins to take on "special meaning." It could be an old friend seen in a new perspective or a complete stranger, but as one informant put it: "My whole world had been transformed. It had a new center and that center was Marilyn."

Infatuation then develops in a characteristic pattern, beginning with "intrusive thinking." Thoughts of the "love object," or the beloved, begin to invade your mind. A certain thing he said rings in your ear; you see her smile, recall a comment, a special moment, an innuendo—and relish it. You wonder what your love would think

of the book you are reading, the movie you just saw, or the problem you are facing at the office. And every tiny segment of the time the two of you have spent together acquires weight and becomes material for review.

At first these intrusive reveries occur irregularly. Some informants reported that thoughts of their beloved invaded their consciousness less than 5 percent of their waking hours. But many said that, as the obsession grew, they spent from 85 to almost 100 percent of their days and nights in sustained mental attentiveness, doting on this single individual. Moreover, they began to focus on the most trivial aspects of the adored one and aggrandize them in a process Tennov calls crystallization.

Crystallization is distinct from idealization in that the infatuated person does indeed perceive the weaknesses of his or her idol. In fact, all of Tennov's limerent subjects could list the faults of their beloved. But they simply cast these flaws aside or convinced themselves that these defects were unique and charming. And they unremittingly doted on the positive parts of their sweetheart's physical features and personality.

Paramount in the daydreams of Tennov's infatuated informants were two overriding sensations: hope and uncertainty. If the cherished person gave the slightest positive response, the infatuated partner would replay these precious fragments in reverie for days. If he or she rebuffed one's overtures, uncertainty might turn to despair instead and the "limerent" would moon about listlessly, brooding until he or she had managed to explain away this setback and renew the quest. Interestingly, a key incendiary was adversity; this always intensified one's passion.

And underlying all of this angst and ecstasy was unmitigated fear. A twenty-eight-year-old truck driver summed up what most informants felt: "I'd be jumpy out of my head," he said. "It was like what you might call stage fright, like going up in front of an audience. My hand would be shaking when I rang the doorbell. When I called her on the phone I felt like I could hear the pulse in my temple louder than the ringing of the phone. . . ."

Most of Tennov's informants reported trembling, pallor, flushing, a general weakness, and overwhelming sensations of awkwardness,

stammering, even loss of their most basic faculties and skills. Stendhal, the nineteenth-century French novelist, described this feeling perfectly. Recalling the afternoons he went strolling with his sweetheart, he wrote, "Whenever I gave my arm to Leonore, I always felt I was about to fall, and I had to think how to walk."<sup>3</sup>

Shyness, fear of rejection, anticipation, and longing for reciprocity were other central sensations of infatuation. Above all, there was the feeling of helplessness, the sense that this passion was irrational, involuntary, unplanned, uncontrollable. . . .

Infatuation, it seems, is a panoply of intense emotions, roller-coasting from high to low, hinged to the pendulum of a single being whose whims command you, to the detriment of everything around you—including work, family, and friends. And this involuntary mosaic of sensations is only partially related to sex. Ninety-five percent of Tennyson's female informants and 91 percent of her male subjects rejected the statement "The best thing about love is sex."

Why do we fall in love with Ray instead of Bill, Sue instead of Ceciley? Why him? Why her? "The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of," contended philosopher Blaise Pascal. Scholars can, however, provide some "reasonable" explanations for this hurricane of emotion.

### *Odor Lures*

Infatuation could be triggered, in part, by one of our most primitive traits—our sense of smell. Every person smells slightly different; we all have a personal "odor print" as distinctive as our voice, our

hands, our intellect. As newborn infants we can recognize our mother by her smell, and as we grow up we come to detect over ten thousand different odors.<sup>4</sup> So if nature be our guide, we are probably susceptible to odor lures.

[T]he human body may produce some of the most powerful olfactory aphrodisiacs of all. Both men and women have "apocrine" glands in their armpits, around their nipples, and in the groin that become active at puberty. These scent boxes differ from "eccrine" glands, which cover much of the body and produce an odorless liquid, because their exudate, in combination with bacteria on the skin, produce the acrid, gamy smell of perspiration.

Baudelaire thought one's soul resided in this erotic sweat. The nineteenth-century French novelist Joris Karl Huysmans, used to follow women through the fields, smelling them. He wrote that the scent of a woman's underarms "easily uncaged the animal in man." Napoleon agreed. He reportedly sent a letter to his sweetheart, Josephine, saying, "I will be arriving in Paris tomorrow evening. Don't wash."<sup>6</sup>

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Today in parts of Greece and the Balkans, some men carry their handkerchiefs in their armpits during festivals and offer these odoriferous tokens to the women they invite to dance; they swear by the results. In fact, sweat is used around the world as an ingredient in love potions. In Shakespeare's day, a woman held a peeled apple under her arm until the fruit became saturated with her scent; then she presented this "love apple" to her lover to inhale. . . .

His smell or her smell could spark strong physical and psychological reactions. Between your eyes, within your skull, at the base of your brain, some five million olfactory neurons dangle from the roof of each nasal cavity, swaying in the air currents you inhale. These nerve cells transmit messages to the part of the brain that controls your sense of smell. But they also link up with the limbic system, a group of primitive structures in the middle of your brain that govern fear, rage, hate, ecstasy, and lust. Because of this brain wiring, smells have the potential to create intense erotic feelings.

A woman's or a man's smell can release a host of memories too. The limbic system contains the seat of long-term memory; thus you can remember odors years after smelling them, whereas many visual and auditory perceptions fade in days or weeks. . . .

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But Americans, the Japanese, and many other people find body odors offensive; for most of them the smell of perspiration is more likely to repel than to attract. . . .

But we certainly like commercially made aromas on a mate. We buy fragrant shampoos, scented soaps, after-shave lotions, and perfumes at exorbitant prices. Then smells of food, fresh air, tobacco, and smells of the office and the home all mix with our natural smells to make an odor soup. A silent label. And people respond. In a recent survey by the Fragrance Foundation, both men and women rated scent as an important aspect of sex appeal—giving odor an 8.4 rating on a scale of 10.<sup>13</sup> Like emperor moths, human beings find smells sexually exciting.

But cultural opinions about perspiration clearly vary. Climate, types of clothing, access to daily bathing, concepts of cleanliness, upbringing, and many other cultural variables condition one's appetite for odors. . . .

This much I propose, however: when you meet someone new whom you find attractive, you probably "like the smell of him," and this helps predispose you to romance. Then, once infatuation flows, the scent of your sweetheart becomes an aphrodisiac, a continuing stimulant to the love affair.

### *Love Maps*

A more important mechanism by which human beings become captivated by "him" or "her" may be what sexologist John Money calls your love map.<sup>14</sup> Long before you fixate on Ray as opposed to Bill,

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Sue instead of Ceciley, you have developed a mental map, a template replete with brain circuitry that determines what arouses you sexually, what drives you to fall in love with one person rather than another.

Children develop these love maps, Money thinks, between ages five and eight (or even earlier) in response to family, friends, experiences, and chance associations. For example, as a child you get used to the turmoil or tranquillity in your house, the way your mother listens, scolds, and pats you and how your father jokes or walks or smells. Certain temperamental features of your friends and relatives strike you as appealing; others you associate with disturbing incidents. And gradually these memories begin to take on a pattern in your mind, a subliminal template for what turns you off, what turns you on.

As you grow up, this unconscious map takes shape and a composite proto-image of the ideal sweetheart gradually emerges. Then in teenage, when sexual feelings flood the brain, these love maps solidify, becoming "quite specific as to details of the physiognomy, build, race and color of the ideal lover, not to mention temperament, manners and so on."<sup>15</sup> You have a mental picture of your perfect mate, the settings you find enticing, and the kinds of conversations and erotic activities that excite you.<sup>16</sup>

So, long before your true love walks past you in a classroom, at a shopping mall, or in the office, you have already constructed some basic elements of your ideal sweetheart. Then, when you actually see someone who fits within these parameters, you fall in love with him or her and project onto this "love blot" your unique love map. The recipient generally deviates considerably from your actual ideal. But you brush aside these inconsistencies to dote on your own construction. Hence Chaucer's famous words "Love is blynd."

### *The Chase*

But let there be mystery. A degree of unfamiliarity is essential to infatuation; people almost never become captivated by someone they know well—as a classic study on an Israeli kibbutz clearly [The material above appears on page 47 of the original.]

illustrates.<sup>21</sup> Here infants were placed in peer groups during the day while their parents worked. Before the age of ten these children often engaged in sexual play, but as they moved into adolescence boys and girls became inhibited and tense with one another. Then, in teenage, they developed strong brother-sister bonds. Almost none married within their peer group, however. A study of 2,769 kibbutzim marriages found that only 13 occurred between peers and that in each of them one mate had left the communal group before the age of six.

Apparently during a critical period in childhood, most individuals lose forever all sexual desire for those they see regularly. Mystery is critical to romantic love.

Barriers also seem to provoke this madness. The chase. If a person is difficult “to get” it piques one’s interest. In fact, this element of conquest is often central to infatuation, hence what has become known as the Romeo and Juliet effect: if real impediments exist, such as the family feud between Shakespeare’s Montagues and Capulets, these obstructions are likely to intensify one’s passion. No wonder people fall for an individual who is married, a foreigner, or someone separated from them by an obstacle that appears almost insurmountable. Yet generally there must also be some slight possibility of fulfillment before one’s first stirrings of infatuation escalate into an obsession.

Timing also plays an important role in infatuation.<sup>22</sup> When individuals are looking for adventure, craving to leave home, lonely, displaced in a foreign country, passing into a new stage in life, or financially and psychologically ready to share themselves or start a family, they become susceptible. From her questionnaires and interviews with over eight hundred Americans, Tennov reported that infatuation occurred only after one had become ready to shower attention on a love object.

Last, as a rule we are drawn to people like ourselves. Likes tend to marry likes—individuals of the same ethnic group, with similar physical traits and levels of education, what anthropologists call positive assortive mating.

Infatuation generally first takes place shortly after puberty. But it can happen at any stage in life. Children experience puppy love;

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some octogenarians fall crazily in love. Once an individual becomes receptive, though, he or she is in danger of falling in love with the next reasonably acceptable person who comes along.

### *Love at First Sight*

It is this constellation of factors appearing *all at once*—including timing, barriers, mystery, similarities, a matched love map, even the right smells—that make you susceptible to falling in love. Then, when that potential love object cocks his or her head, smiles or gazes at you, you get that rush. It can happen gradually or in a second—hence the phenomenon of love at first sight.

And this powerful, sometimes instantaneous attraction is not unique to Westerners.

... Vatsya, the author of the *Kama Sutra*, the classic work on love in Sanskrit literature, lived in India sometime between the first and sixth century A.D., and he clearly described romantic love between men and women. He even provided detailed instructions on how couples might court, embrace, kiss, fondle, and copulate. Despite the Confucian emphasis on filial piety that has long saturated Chinese mores, written tales dating back to the seventh century A.D. reveal the agony of men and women torn between obedience to their elders and romantic passion for a loved one.<sup>24</sup> In traditional Japan, star-crossed lovers sometimes chose double suicide, known as *shin ju*, when they found themselves betrothed to different partners.

The eastern Cherokee believed that if a young man sings to a girl at midnight, “she will dream of him, become lonesome for him and,

when they next meet, be drawn irresistibly to him." Yukaghir girls of northeast Siberia wrote "love letters" on birch bark. In Bali, men believed a woman would "fall in love" if her suitor fed her a certain kind of leaf incised with the image of a god who sported a very large penis.

Even peoples who deny having concepts of "love" or "being in love" act otherwise. Mergians of Polynesia are casual in their sexual affairs, but occasionally a desperate young man who is not permitted to marry his girlfriend kills himself. The Bem-Bem of the New Guinea highlands do not admit that they feel this passion either, but a girl sometimes refuses to marry the man whom her father has chosen for her and runs away with a "true love" instead. The Tiv of Africa, who have no formal concept of romance, call this passion "madness."<sup>25</sup>

Love stories, myths, legends, poems, songs, instruction manuals, love potions, love charms, lovers' quarrels, trysts, elopements, and suicides are part of life in traditional societies around the world. In fact, in a survey of 168 cultures, anthropologists William Jankoviak, and Edward Fischer were able to find direct evidence for the existence of romantic love in 87 percent of these vastly different peoples.<sup>26</sup>

This madness, this limerence, this attraction, this infatuation, this ecstasy so regularly ignored by scientists, must be a universal human trait.

### *The Chemistry of Love*

People probably began to discuss attraction more than a million years ago as they lay on riverbanks in Africa to rest and watch the sky. More-recent thinkers have come up with astute observations about this fever. W. H. Auden likened sexual craving to "an intolerable neural itch." H. L. Mencken described it differently, saying, "To be in love is merely to be in a state of perceptual anaesthesia." Both sensed that something physical was happening in the brain, anticipating what could be an astonishing discovery about the chemistry of love.

This violent emotional disturbance that we call infatuation (or attraction) may begin with a small molecule called phenylethylamine, or PEA. Known as the excitant amine, PEA is a substance in the brain that causes feelings of elation, exhilaration, and euphoria. But to understand exactly how PEA might contribute to attraction, you need to know a few things about the inside of your head.

The human brain is about the size of a grapefruit, weighing approximately three pounds, with an average volume of about 1,400 cubic centimeters. It is about three times larger than those of our closest relatives, chimpanzees and gorillas, whose average brain volumes are approximately 400 and 500 cubic centimeters respectively.

In the 1970s neuroscientist Paul MacLean postulated that the brain is divided into three general sections. Actually, it is a good deal more complex than this, but MacLean's perspective is still useful as an overview. The most primitive section surrounds the final bulb at the end of the spinal cord. This area, which deserves its reputation as the "reptilian brain," governs instinctual behaviors such as aggression, territoriality, ritual, and the establishment of social hierarchies. We probably use this area of the brain in courtship when we "instinctively" strut, preen, and flirt.

Above and surrounding the reptilian brain is a group of structures in the middle of the head known collectively as the limbic system.

...[T]hese structures govern the basic emotions—fear, rage, joy, sadness, disgust, love, and hate. So when you are overcome with happiness, paralyzed with fright, infuriated, revolted, or despondent, it is portions of the limbic system that are producing electrical and chemical disturbances. The storm of infatuation almost certainly has its physical origin here.

Overlaying the limbic system (and separated by a large layer of white matter that communicates between brain parts) is the cortex, a gray, convoluted rind of spongy matter that lies directly below the skull. The cortex processes basic functions like sight, hearing, speech, and mathematical and musical abilities. Most important, the cortex integrates your emotions with your thoughts. It is this section of the brain that *thinks* about "him" or "her."

Here, then, is how PEA (and probably other neurochemicals, such

as norepinephrine and dopamine) may play a role. Within and connecting the three basic parts of the brain are neurons, or nerve cells; there are at least one hundred billion of them. Impulses travel through one neuron and jump across a gap—a synapse—to the next nerve cell. This way they gambol along the neuronal highways of the mind.

PEA lies at the end of some nerve cells and helps the impulse jump from one neuron to the next. Equally important, PEA is a natural amphetamine; it revs up the brain. So psychiatrist Michael Liebowitz of the New York State Psychiatric Institute speculates that we feel infatuation when neurons in the limbic system, our emotional core, become saturated or sensitized by PEA and/or other brain chemicals—and stimulate the brain.<sup>29</sup>

No wonder lovers can stay awake all night talking and caressing. No wonder they become so absentminded, so giddy, so optimistic, so gregarious, so full of life. Naturally occurring amphetamines have pooled in the emotional centers of their brains; they are high on natural "speed."

### *Romance Junkies*

Liebowitz and his colleague Donald Klein arrived at this conclusion while treating patients they called attraction junkies. These people crave a relationship. In their haste they pick an unsuitable partner. Soon they are rejected, and their exhilaration turns to despair—until they renew their quest. As this cycle of miserable love affairs proceeds, the romance junkie swings from feeling brokenhearted and desperately depressed to feeling elated over each inappropriate, ill-fated romantic fling.

Both psychiatrists suspected that these lovesick people suffered from a tangle in their romantic wiring—specifically a craving for PEA. So in some highly experimental work they gave these attraction junkies MAO inhibitors. These antidepressant drugs block the action of a special enzyme in the brain—monoamine oxidase, or MAO, a class of substances that break down PEA and other neurotransmitters (norepinephrine, dopamine, and serotonin). Thus MAO inhibitors actually boost levels of PEA and these other natural



amphetamines, heightening the infatuation high.

To everyone's astonishment, within weeks of receiving MAO inhibitors, one perpetually lovesick man began to choose his partners more carefully, even starting to live comfortably without a mate. Apparently he no longer craved the PEA high he used to get from his exciting yet disastrous love affairs. . . .

Psychiatrist Hector Sabelli independently arrived at the same conclusion about PEA. In a study of thirty-three people who were happily attached to a "significant other" and who reported to Sabelli that they were feeling great, *all* were found to have high levels of the PEA metabolite in their urine too. PEA levels were low in a man and woman who were going through a divorce—probably, he says, because both spouses were suffering from a low-grade depression as they parted.<sup>30</sup>

. . .

Auden and Mencken probably described romantic attraction astutely. The feeling of infatuation may result from a deluge of PEA and/or other natural stimulants that saturate the brain, transforming the senses, altering reality.

But infatuation is more than exhilaration. It is part of love, a deep, "mystical" devotion to another human being. Is this complex sensation due solely to natural stimulants in the brain?

Not at all. In fact, PEA may give us no more than a generalized sense of awakesness, alertness, excitement and an elevated mood, as Sabelli suggests. Sabelli measured the amount of PEA released in

the urine of parachute jumpers before and after a jump. During free-fall, PEA levels soared. A divorcing couple also experienced a PEA high during court proceedings.<sup>31</sup> It appears, then, that PEA gives us no more than a shot of exhilaration and apprehension—a chemical high that accompanies a range of experiences, including infatuation.

### *Cupid's Second Arrow: Culture*

Liebowitz's and Sabelli's work on the chemistry of love has caused a great deal of controversy, not only among colleagues who, like them, recognize that this research is still speculative, but also among those embroiled in the old nature/nurture controversy—that perennial debate about how much of our behavior derives from genes, from nature and heredity, how much of human conduct stems from childhood experiences, from culture, from what we learn.

. . .

. . . [C]ulture plays a major role in love. You begin in childhood to like and dislike the smells in your environment. You learn to respond to certain kinds of humor. You get used to the peace or hysteria in your home. And you begin to build your love map from your experiences. Then, in teenage, you join the military, go away to college, or become otherwise displaced. These and many other *cultural* events determine *whom* you love, *when* you love, *where* you love. But after you find that special person, it is probably PEA and/

or other natural neurochemicals in the brain that direct *how* you feel *as* you love. As usual, culture and biology go hand in hand.

. . .

Tennov also found variation among the over eight hundred Americans she polled about romance in the 1960s and 1970s. A few men and women claimed that they had never felt infatuation, whereas others fell in love quite frequently. But Tennov reports that the vast majority of both genders experienced the ecstasy of romantic love—and they felt it “in roughly equal proportions.” Sexologists John Money and Anke Ehrhardt confirm this; like Tennov, they found no gender differences in the experience of infatuation.<sup>33</sup>

Scientists are far from understanding this obsession. But one fact is becoming undeniable: infatuation is a physical as well as a psychological phenomenon. And physical mechanisms evolve through evolution. The limbic system, the emotional core of the brain, is rudimentary in reptiles but well developed in all mammals. . . .

Alas, infatuation fades. As Emerson put it, “Love is strongest in pursuit, friendship in possession.” At some point, that old black magic wanes. For teenagers a “crush” can last a week. Lovers who see each other irregularly, because of some barrier like an ocean or a wedding ring from another person, can sometimes sustain that smitten feeling for several years.

Yet there does seem to be a general length to this condition. Tennov measured the duration of romantic love; from the moment infatuation hit to when a “feeling of neutrality” for one’s love object

*[The material below appears on page 57 in the original.]*

began. She concluded, “The most frequent interval, as well as the average, is between approximately 18 months and three years.” John Money agrees, proposing that once you begin to see your sweetheart regularly the passion typically last two to three years.<sup>34</sup>

Liebowitz suspects that the end of infatuation is also grounded in brain physiology. He theorizes that the brain cannot eternally maintain the revved-up state of romantic bliss. Either the nerve endings become habituated to the brain’s natural stimulants or levels of PEA (and/or other natural amphetamine-like substances) begin to drop. The brain can no longer tolerate the onslaught of these drugs. As he sums it up, “If you want a situation where you and your long-term partner can still get very excited about each other, you’ll have to work on it, because in some ways you are bucking a biological tide.”<sup>35</sup>

Now an even more insidious emotion emerges—attachment. This is the warm, comfortable, secure feeling that so many couples report. And Liebowitz is convinced that, as infatuation wanes and attachment grows, a new chemical system is taking over—the opiates of the mind. These substances, the endorphins (short for “endogenous morphines”), are chemically similar to morphine, an opiate, a narcotic. Like PEA, the endorphins reside at the brain’s nerve endings, travel between synapses from one nerve cell to the next, and pool in specific areas in the brain. Unlike PEA, they calm the mind, kill pain, and reduce anxiety.

Liebowitz theorizes that partners in the attachment stage of love trigger the production of endorphins in each other, giving each the sense of safety, stability, tranquillity. Now lovers can talk and eat and sleep in peace.<sup>36</sup>

No one has speculated about how long the stage of attachment lasts, either in the brain or in relationships. I suspect it varies with different human brains, with social circumstances, and with age. . . . [T]he older you get, the easier it is to remain attached. But the sensation of infatuation has both a beginning and an end. As Stendhal brilliantly put it: “Love is like a fever that comes and goes quite independently of the will.”

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Why does love ebb and flow? The pulse of infatuation, like many of our courting gestures, may be part of nature’s scheme—soft-wired in the brain by time, by evolution, and by ancient patterns of human bonding.