



The age of lust

Christa D'Souza is delightfully, contentedly settled in a long-term relationship with a man she loves. So why do her thoughts keep turning to sex – with other men?

Last month my other half started asking me what I wanted for my fiftieth birthday. My fiftieth. Goodness. What a biggie that one is. Well, let's see, what do I want to mark this most important yet sensitive occasion? A piece of engraved jewellery, perhaps? Or a very, very big something from Matches. Or what about a sit-down dinner for 250 with commemorative ashtrays and a film and a world-famous live band, like the one my friend held for her other half last spring.

On the other hand, wait a minute. Let's think about this. Is that really what I want? A party? A necklace? A frock that I'll choose myself and will probably bully him into letting me wear well before the actual day? This is a milestone, and I want it marked in

a truly special, unique way. The gift he gives me has to be something he has taken the maximum amount of care and attention to detail upon acquiring, something I'll never ever forget for the rest of our days together.

Well, if he is reading this, I may have the perfect idea. OK. Are we ready? Here goes, though I might have to say it in a whisper: sex with somebody else. Yes, that's right, a one-off, one-night only, last-chance saloon shag with someone other than the person I love and cherish and sincerely plan on spending the rest of my life with – which I do. Absolutely. But the idea that I will never, ever do it with anyone else ever, ever again can't help but make me feel a little sad and panicky. I don't want to get to my deathbed like John

Betjeman did and regret that of all the things I wish I'd done is had more sex.

This mourning period, perhaps it is simply a facet of being faithful to another person for a long period of time (unlike prairie voles, we humans are not by nature monogamous). But it becomes more and more acute as one moves towards the big five-oh, the stark, inescapable realisation that those sorts of opportunities have all but run out; that the sense of promise one had in one's teens, twenties and thirties just isn't there any more. Perhaps if one had been at it like a rabbit in one's salad days, it would be easier to say goodbye to, but I wasn't. So when I see young couples on the Tube with that urgent look in their eyes I can't help but feel a little resentful. And, by the way, is it just me, or is London not suddenly teeming with super-cute guys?

Reaching 50 may be the tipping point when brawn suddenly becomes more important than brains. And youth. Take the married mother I know, about to hit 50, who has developed such a crush on her godson she's had to tell his mother not to bring him round again. I understand her dilemma. Sometimes I can't help looking at my university-going stepsons in *quite* the wrong way. See, however fabulous-looking an older man is, however assiduously he goes to the gym, at some point his bottom will start to sag.

Everyone has their "pink ticket", the person your partner would allow you to do it with if, by strange misalignment of the planets, the opportunity ever presented itself. My boyfriend (of nearly 17 years) is currently holding Gemma Arterton. At the top of mine, in descending order, are the actor Michael Fassbender (see the sex scenes in *Fish Tank*), Nicholas "Skins" Hoult and John Terry. Although, thinking about it, mine wouldn't have to be that high-end. In a way the butcher's cheeky former son-in-law or the Kiwi removal boy who unpacked for us a little while back would do just as well.

Oh hush my mouth, right? The corrosiveness, the insanity, the built-in insatiability of it all. What on *earth* am I thinking about, with my near perfect relationship and my wonderful, spoiling life? I must be mad.

And yet. What a thrill it would be to experience lust's vice-like grip just one more time. The butterflies, the sweaty palms, the loss of appetite. What a lovely, beautiful gift to receive, the re-capturing for future memory – as I hit the youth of old age, as opposed to the other way round – one last, fleeting moment of pure, naked, achy-breaky lust. >

I'd return the favour for his next big birthday, of course. Might that be too much to ask?

Lust. Or *lujuria* as it is deliciously, licentiously called in Spanish (and *Wollust*, hah, in German). An intense or unrestrained pursuit of gratification, an overwhelming or obsessive desire. An overwhelming, obsessive and ultimately limiting desire, which overrides everything, but everything, else. You can't argue with it – that teenagery, electrical jolt when the phone rings, that quality to sustain one through the most stultifying of days, that feeling you simply, physiologically cannot feel (Sorry, Sting and Trudie) if you have been in a relationship for a certain amount of years (Roleplay? Oh, please. Isn't that like trying to tickle yourself?) – it just *is*.

What a tonic it is for the looks, too. Check out pictures of yourself and your boyfriend when you were first courting; look at anybody, actually, in the first stages of a relationship and you'll see what I mean. All that PEA (phenylethylamine, that rollercoaster substance, also found in chocolate, which supposedly dies out after a period of between 18 months to three years or, according to a dear friend of mine, 12 weeks from the first time) coursing through one's veins. It's the equivalent of a long stay at the Mayr clinic, if you like. Your eyeballs are whiter, your wrinkles are finer, you're just much "muchier" as Johnny "Mad Hatter" Depp (on the pink-ticket front, a little too clever, and a little too long in the tooth for me) would say. Whatever you radiate, plastic surgeons and psychopharmacologists take note, is immediately radiated back. You get the taxi in the pouring rain, you catch the surly waiter's eye, snotty shopkeepers bend over backwards. The world, in short, owes you a favour.

Oh, but the things, the unspeakable, unthinkable, virtually undoable things us women have done in its primitive, lizardy name. Remember Brenda's relief in *A Handful of Dust* when she finds out it is her son who has been killed in an accident rather than her lover? Remember how Anna Karenina gave up her child, her husband, her life for that rotter, Count Vronsky? Remember me, actually, back in the day, hurrying 20 baffled people out of a sit-down supper at my flat before pudding was served just because *he*, the nobody I was in lust with at the time, had called and demanded to come over right there and then. "Lust's passion will be served," as the Marquis de Sade aptly put it. "It demands, it militates, it tyrannises." Or, as someone else also put it, "Lust is the craving for salt of a man dying of thirst."

Thank goodness that rollercoaster feeling does peter out a bit. Thank goodness the idea of reading one's book does become more attractive as time marches on. Thank goodness, as we get older, the effort outweighs the pleasure. Look. After 17 years, on birthdays and high holidays, fine. And you should see me when I've had a few too many. But there are times when I very much sympathise with the friend who, when she knows her husband is going to come in after a late night and start worrying her like a dog worries a sheep, feels like pinning a note to her back which reads "no entry barred, as long as you don't wake me". As Long As You Don't Wake Me, the story of married sex, as she puts it. Maybe that loss of lust-induced libido is nature's way of letting us know that once we hit a certain point, the idea of pulling isn't so much a ludicrous one as a downright specialist one and the baton must, but must, be passed on.

And yet – there are those rogue pockets when, as a not particularly poetic girlfriend of

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mine put it, someone looks at you and you suddenly "blossom" like a flower, and feel like a "light has been turned on" inside. When you feel like the nice, kind, solvent Mr Goodenuff you're with now just isn't, well, goodenuff. Those dangerous, unpredictable pockets that spring up in the most inappropriate situations; those hit-by-a-mallet pockets which remind you that all that swooning and throbbing and so forth you felt 20, 30 years ago, isn't extinct. It's just been dormant. And where, pray, when it re-erupts out of nowhere, does one neatly put that? Is every one, unbeknownst to me, satisfying the urge? Or does the current vogue for austerity and, by association, fidelity mean we're all, as it were, in mourning? What is the answer to *the* problem?

"Basically, we're screwed... it's a nightmare," agrees a friend. "What are we supposed to do? Buy the top-of-the-range Rabbit from Ann Summers? Become a lesbian? Become self-sufficient in the G-spot department? Take up adrenaline sports?" "Get a pink ticket from your partner and pray you don't fall in the love with the person assuaging your desires," suggests another.

"Think like a teenager," advises another friend, Amelia Wallace, who is writing a book

on this very subject. "Remember what fun it was as a teen spending languid hours imagining, what if? Instead of despairing that I will never sleep with Jon Hamm, I think wouldn't it be fun if I *did* sleep with Jon Hamm? Daydreaming can still be delicious."

Having lusty thoughts (as I do, however many thousands of times I rewind to the scene in *Fish Tank* where Michael Fassbender commits statutory rape) and acting on them (even if it's just the once), most agree, are two entirely different things. Which is not to say there are some of us who don't sail very, very close to the wind.

Then there is the indignity of it all. The pathetic, shabby, humiliating things we will put ourselves through in the name of mere lust. You've not been there? Ever? You've never waited and waited and waited for the telephone to ring and when it does, finally at three in the morning, or the next day or the next week or even the month after that, when you've sworn to yourself *never* to go there again, found yourself jumping to attention, willing to do anything, anything, for one more time? That wild, careering, out-of-control feeling, how exciting, how visceral, how vital it is. Isn't this, ultimately, what life's all about? The pain of it. The desire to listen to the sad song over and over and over again, the rolling around the floor keening like a wild animal, the desire to have a filling. Without an anaesthetic. *Anything*. Rather than this. Isn't that all part of lust's all encompassing allure?

What to do? Supposedly just carry on. Until fate intervenes, as it sort of did not so long ago when I found myself in a bar in Mykonos on an all-ladies mini break, in our cougar uniforms of cut-off shorts and bits of fluorescent string totem-poled up our arms, drinking mojitos, and talking about schools and nannies and the curse of Playstation. Out of the corner of my eye I clocked a party of young, handsome Italians, sitting at the next table.

I remember thinking wistfully, if only it were 20 years ago. But, heigh-ho, it is not. And then, what do you know, they came over and asked us if they could buy us a round of drinks. Yes. One of them, the shortest but in my opinion the cutest, even wrote down his number for me. My secret fiftieth birthday present to myself? Good God, no. My immediate impulse was to call my other half and tell him I'd finally pulled. That's not lust. That's love. And on balance I'll settle for the latter. It requires a modicum of discipline, of course, but so what? I cannot afford to dwell on the fact that the opportunity, now I'm half of a hundred, may never, ever present itself again. ■