“Friends with Benefits”

December 14, 2007 By David Weiss

I?ve always had a bad history with dogs. Our first family dog, a chocolate colored standard poodle named Cocoa, disappeared when I was 3 years old. The dog was no fool, and wisely slipped out the back door when I became obsessed with Cocoa?s appendages.

We replaced Cocoa with Pepe, a black miniature poodle puppy whose energy and enthusiasm for burying my mother?s favorite rhinestone pumps delighted me and matched my own proclivity for causing general mayhem in the house. Pepe and I were inseparable until the day that Pepe was flattened on Roslyn Road five years later while under the influence under of a pheremonal frenzy induced by Jolie, the fluffy golden pomeranian owned by the neighbors across the street.

I was devastated by Pepe?s sudden and unsavory demise. Desperate to console their miserable

child, my father persuaded Aunt Ethel to part with Tiffany, her white miniature. Tragically, however, my dad backed over Tiffany in the driveway with his British racing green MGB as he left for the next day?s morning commute to Manhattan.

We buried Tiffany?s remains next to Pepe in a shallow grave next to the tetherball pole in the backyard, and after my father delivered a brief eulogy for Tiffany, we all piled into the family Pontiac and drove to the North Shore kennel, where we adopted Bomber, an adorable wire-haired terrier pup. For three long and lazy summer days our family once enjoyed a reasonable measure of domestic tranquility. The next morning, July 14, 1958, I discovered Bomber?s bloated corpse floating in our swimming pool, shattering the brief period of serenity that Bomber had brought to the Kushner* clan.

Not to be discouraged, my parents tried again. They scanned the classified pages of Newsday together, settling on a lively two year old terrier bitch named ?Gypsy? whose temperament former her owner described as ?perfect for a small family?. But true to her name, Gypsy fled out the back door the next day.

We should have gotten the message. As fate would have it, however, ?Duke?, an enormous yellow labrador stray, fortuitously found his way into my mother?s azalias and I once again fell in love. I lured the dog into the house with a trail of crumbled Kennel Biskits, gazing intently as the gigantic beast padded from room to room. My mother, skeptical about the dog?s sudden arrival as well as his general suitability, followed the animal?s footsteps, broom in hand, ready to shoo the dog out the front door at the first sign of trouble. Duke, undoubtedly sensing her lack of enthusiasm, calmly lifted his right hind leg and urinated on her new Maytag. My mother immediately swept the dog out the front door, ending my short-lived rapture. My father - recognizing the bad canine karma in the house - explained to me that it was perhaps God ?s intention that the Kushner family was destined to be dogless.

Losing five dogs in seven days is the kind of childhood experience you never forget, and when I became old enough to start dating I was wary of forming any kind of romantic attachments with my teenage girlfriends because somewhere in the back of my mind I was afraid that the same misfortunes that struck my dogs would surely happen to them. Instead of falling in love, I fell ?in like? and I embarked on a series of relationships that resembled what we now call ?Friends with benefits.?

?Friends with benefits.? It?s such a clever euphemism. It sounds so benign - a much more dignified expression than ?F**k Buddies?. You would think its easy to find a suitable FB, but it isn?t. The truth of the matter is that someone almost always gets hurt. Someone always feels just a little something in his or her heart, something that makes you want to be there, lying next to each other, all of the time.

You may have read about a hormone called ?oxytocin?. Oxytocin is one of the many hormones that our bodies - male and female alike - release during orgasm. According to the latest research, oxytocin acts as kind of emotional Astro-Glide that facilitates bonding when we have sex. One

source describes it as ?a nine amino acid peptide that is synthesized in hypothalamic neurons and transported down axons of the posterior pituitary for secretion into blood.? Somehow, that description seems a bit sterile. It doesn?t quite communicate the complicated emotional components of human sexuality. Its kind of like saying that Crazy Glue is a little sticky. Or that heroin is a little addictive.

I?m sure that its possible to block that inconvenient chemical bond. If we can block HIV at the sub-cellular level by taking a few pills, surely we can condition ourselves to resist the effects of a common hormone. Surely. No problemo. Just like getting used to caffeine. Or maybe like being a quiet drunk.

Quite some time ago, I had an FB we?ll call Jane. We had a few mutual acquaintances when we were students at SUNY Binghamton, and after we both moved down to New York we became friends. It didn?t take long before we became more than that. Over a period lasting a few years from the late 70s until the early 80s, Jane and I used to get together once in a while and have a few drinks together, and we would find our way back to my apartment near Gramercy Park or her place a few blocks south. We never really talked about our little arrangement, preferring instead the old ?I could really use a massage? ruse; sometimes we skipped that routine and got right down to business. But in the back of my mind I always kind of wondered whether Jane felt that little tug, that little piece of heartbreak that comes when you slip out the door and go home to your own bed, alone.

I?ve had one or two other FBs in my day. It?s amazing how delusional we can be when it comes to our satisfying our physical needs. Perhaps we all have some kind of innate ability to secrete another kind of hormone that kicks in when we want to dilute that nasty old oxytocin goop - kind of the same way that Naloxone soaks up heroin. Sometimes I think that ?oxymoron? would be the perfect name for it. If there is such an ?anti-oxytocin? hormone I?d like to bottle it and register the brand name. I can just picture the advertising compaign: ?Hooking up tonight? Don?t want to fall in love? Don?t be a fool!, be an Oxymoron!?

If there is such an anti-emotion lotion, I know quite a few people, including myself, who might be very interested in it these days. You could slather it on your face like cologne. It might not keep the bugs away, but it would certainly make life simpler for a lot of us.

Everyone is different and there are times in our lives when we are less vulnerable to unwanted attachments. There are those of us who can be FBs and remain friends without longings and regrets. It takes an extraordinary confluence of circumstance and personalities to become and to remain FBs, but it does happen. I just wish it would happen to me....I think.

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* The names have been changed to protect the not-so-innocent.

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