

How not to be lousy in bed

Just a friendly reminder that there's plenty of fish—and other things—in the sea

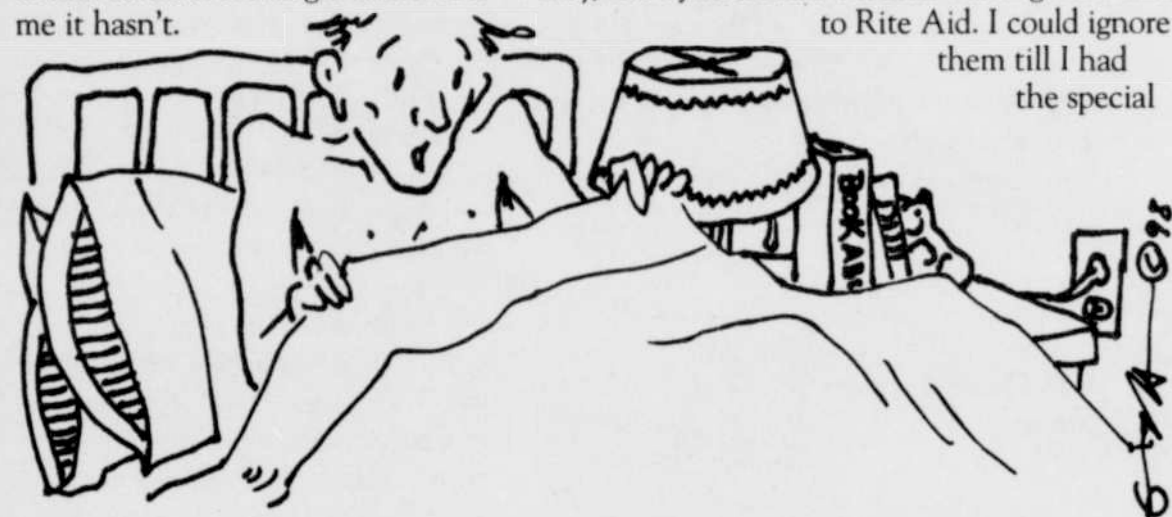
Having been single for more than a month now, I've had the time, freedom and motivation to make some new friends and reacquaint myself with some old ones.

One old friend, whom I hadn't seen at any point during my four-and-a-half-year involvement with Mr. Ex, paid a special visit.

Embracing me in a pubic bear hug, Mr. Crabs was as clingy as ever.

Only a couple of weeks out of the breakup gate and already I'd been loused. "Welcome back to singlehood!" my little chorus line seemed to shout up at me.

This marked my third encounter with the faux crustaceans. One would think it would get easier. For me it hasn't.



Granted, I know how to handle them now, but that hasn't made it any less likely that the little bugs will burrow into my psyche as surely as they burrow into my flesh. Like all scars, though, it's usually good for a story. And the story of my first infestation is worth retelling.

A week or so after enjoying the company of a huge Virginian covered in a blond gorilla suit while attending school in Richmond, the aliens landed.

I was visiting my mother in Florida for winter break and was grossly unprepared. I woke up one morning and noticed what I thought was some tropical tick on my pointer finger. Apparently I'd passed the night with my hand too close to my crotch. (How'd that get there?)

Assuming my mother would have the low-down on the local flora and fauna—considering she'd lost two toenails to a Floridian soil-borne fungus—I paraded my finger and my little friend for her scrutiny. "Mom, do you have any idea what this is?" I asked.

She adjusted her eyes to the magnifying half of her bifocals and took a long, hard look. I'm sure my trampy father would've identified the bug from across the room. Not Mom, though. She chalked it up to another field-study encounter that comes with living in the tropics. She advised me to burn it off with a match.

I excused myself to the bathroom with its lovely antiseptics, scalding water, fungicides and topical-use-only toxic ointments—things that spell safety and comfort to me and my neurosis.

As soon as I'd incinerated my digital hitchhiker, the reality hit me in one nauseating, embarrassing blow. My eyes slowly fell to my boxers in that same terrified way B-movie actresses slowly turn their heads toward the waiting alien or vampire or what have you before they start screaming.

I held my breath as I unveiled the goods, half expecting those minuscule parasites to start flying around the room or screeching

defensively. In actuality, they were silent and still, though bountiful.

Looking at my little colony, I was dumbfounded that I hadn't noticed them earlier. According to the only lesson I had on the matter (a few scenes from the movie *The Last American Virgin*), when crabs wash up on your shore you know immediately. Not so in my case.

But once you have them, the drill remains the same. It involves foul-smelling, chrysanthemum-based shampoo that does nothing for body and shine, and loads of hot laundry.

My latest visitation so shocked me that I made shaving part of the protocol. I'm sure any pharmacist would call that added step unnecessary, but I just couldn't sit still waiting for a ride to Rite Aid. I could ignore them till I had the special

shampoo as easily as I could sleep in a burning building.

Unfortunately, recovering from the shaving has been far itchier than anything crabs ever dished out. It's been so uncomfortable that my shaved crotch has been tantamount to wearing a chastity belt. But the only relief I've been looking for involves long fingernails and some moisturizer.

Despite my shock...and annoyance...and grief, my little friends did offer me something in return: a wake-up call. During my relationship with Mr. Ex, we practiced what Michelangelo Signorile and Australian AIDS prevention literature refer to as "negotiated safety." We had unprotected sex, but only with each other. The arrangement worked successfully for us, but after years of security it was easy to forget that every person is a potential Pandora's Box of communicable nastiness.

While I certainly remembered to bring condoms when I packed up and moved out of Chez Ex, I forgot that humans are plagued not only by HIV, but by herpes and its array of simplexes, an alphabet soup of hepatitises, genital warts, and more. HIV can be downright difficult to contract compared to some of its less ominous compadres.

Not that this has turned me off sex. At least, it won't have once my hair grows back. I've never been a critic of casual, safer sex between consenting adults. As a reminder to slow down, though, I'm grateful for my recent infestation. When I was 21, I could fuck with abandon as long as I had latex. Now, at 28, I'm feeling a bit more cautious. As I age, I find I'm much less willing to be inconvenienced.

I don't think it would be out of the question to ask potential partners to submit to a quick lice check. I don't think I'd have the nerve to ask, but I don't think the request would be unreasonable. A cold sore merits extra scrutiny and perhaps a questionnaire.

With an ounce of prevention and the remaining half bottle of crab-killing shampoo I'm sure I'll find the middle ground between incubator and sexpot.

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