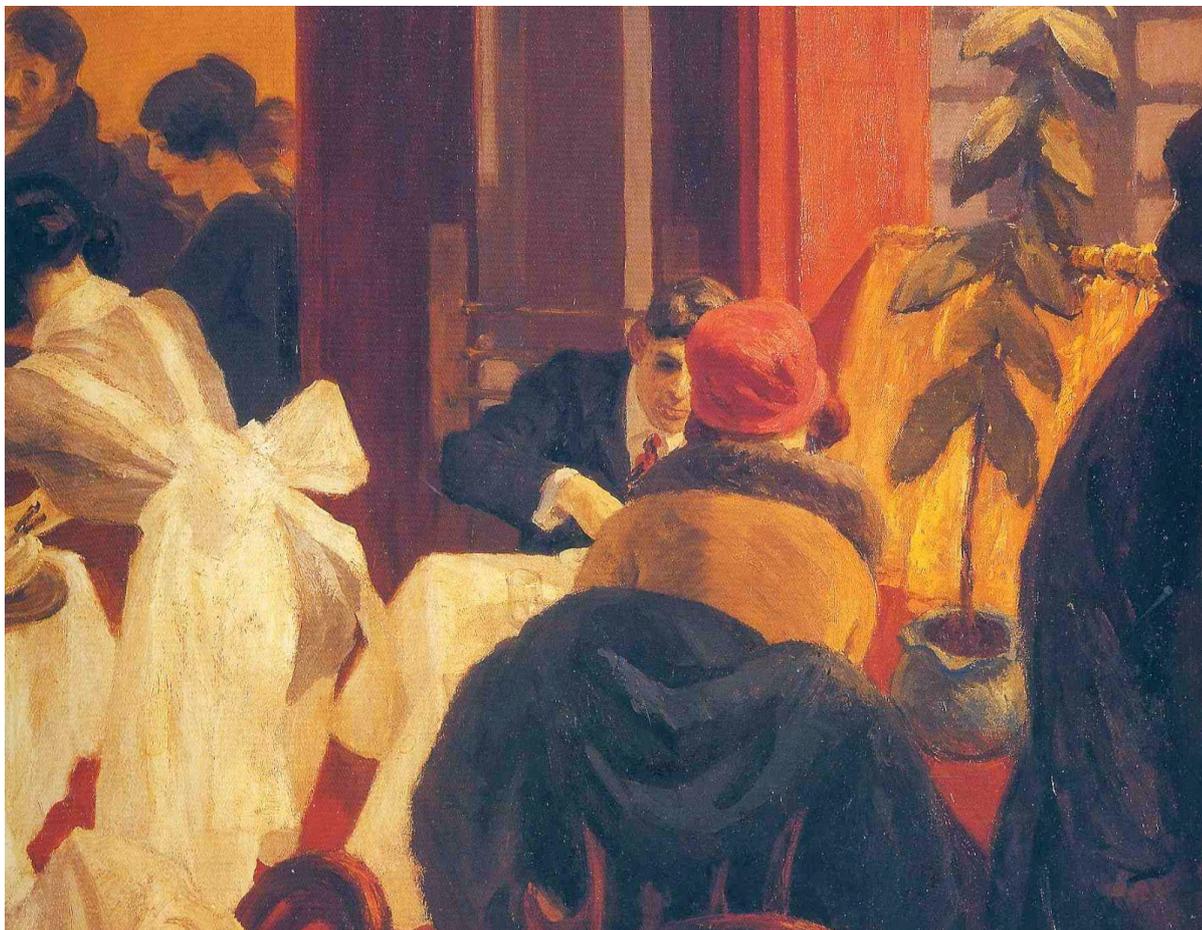


My Evolution as a Mammal

by [Peter Lopatin](#) (November 2019)



New York Restaurant, Edward Hopper, 1922

A few months ago, my desire for female companionship led me to start browsing the online personals, where I thought I might find the “right” woman, one who would appreciate my unique qualities, a woman who, like me, is a bit out of the mold, with a sense of the big picture, the great tapestry of human experience.

I was extremely disappointed with what I found: women looking for "soul-mates"; women who want to take lots of long walks; women who want to spend Sunday mornings reading the New York Times with their men; women with two or more dogs; and, especially, women who purport to maintain a degree of physical activity far beyond anything of which I have ever been capable.

It seems too that most women are looking for pretty much the same sort of men: men who are strong, successful and confident, but not pushy, snooty, or arrogant; men who can show their vulnerability and soft side but who aren't wimpy and needy and indecisive; men who are equally at ease in a tuxedo on opening night at the Met or in an old pair of jeans, lounging in front of a blazing fireplace at a Vermont country inn. These men are supposed to be "huggable." Their personal grooming must adhere to the highest standards. They must be "professionals" with advanced degrees, highly successful and stable in their careers and serious about their work (which they must find "rewarding.") However, they must appreciate the importance of balancing their professional and personal lives and must not be workaholics. Whatever demands their work may make on them, they are expected to be able to "stop and smell the roses." They must be "financially secure," but they must not be materialistic. Like the women who seek them, they should be "spiritual," but not religious. They must be "intuitive" but not dreamy. They must be comfortable in all conceivable social situations. They must be highly intelligent, but should not be brooding intellectuals. They should have a certain ineffable "*je ne sais quoi*" or "*joie de vivre*" or, at the very least, "*esprit*." They should be well traveled and eager to travel more. (Paris, Venice, Tuscany, Provence, Machu Pichu, and Angkor Wat are favored destinations.) But beyond all that, many women say they are looking for a man who is "evolved." What precisely that might

mean had puzzled me, but it was soon to become much clearer.

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Failing, as I did, to meet most of the basic requirements set down by these women (many of whom, I should note, are quite pleasing to the eye) I was teetering at the edge of romantic despair, peering, as it were, into the abyss of loneliness and unfulfilled desire, caught up in a gloomy sense of my fundamental inadequacy as a man and potential mate. It affected my mood and appearance. Friends asked: "What's wrong, Peter? You look tired. Is everything all right? Are you getting enough rest? Maybe you should take some time off." Some suggested multivitamins, anti-oxidants, acupuncture, and various herbs. Then, just a few weeks ago, my friend Jack, concerned for my welfare, invited me to join him and some of his friends for drinks at a hip Manhattan bar after work. I didn't really feel like going but Jack was quite insistent. He said, "Peter, you have to get out there." And so I did.

When we arrived, the place was full of just the sort of people I didn't need to be around: handsome, impeccably groomed men in perfectly tailored suits; beautiful, bright-eyed women, confidently tossing their hair to one side, smiling provocatively at this or that handsome hedge-fund manager or throwing sultry glances at a forty-something Senior Vice President for Legislative and Regulatory Affairs of a major pharmaceutical company who had just walked in. Things could not have been more disheartening.

Jack is an investment banker who made a fortune—and somehow managed to hold onto it—in something called “reverse depository back-end swaps.” He’s married to a gorgeous, much younger, former Ford model. He tried his best to get me into the swing of things. It was all a whirl of activity and I don’t really remember how it happened, but I found myself standing alone near a small group of chic, attractive women, close enough to eavesdrop on their conversation. One of them was a brunette, quite beautiful, leggy, standing tall and confident in her stilettos. I later learned that she is the senior editor of a major fashion magazine. She was wearing one of those chic, sexy suits that are *de rigueur* for a woman in the fashion industry but that no woman lawyer or Vice President of Human Resources would dare wear to the office. The skirt was slim and short, with a slit up the right leg that might get a woman arrested on a morals charge in North Carolina. She was speaking with great conviction to a few other women, similarly attired, though none so fetching. The senior editor and her friends were talking about the difficulties of meeting the “right” sort of men.

“I mean, what is it with these guys?” she said. “They’re all so . . . what’s the word? Primitive. I wish I could meet a guy who’s really *evolved!* Do you know what I mean?”

Her friends nodded vigorously in agreement.

At that point I felt myself undergo a curious internal transformation. The noise of conversation around me seemed somehow muted. I felt a transient swoon, a momentary lightheadedness. Then, the figurative “click” of realization

gripped me. Seized by a sudden, overwhelming sense of confidence, I turned full face to the senior editor. She looked at me confidently, as if to say, "Do I know you?" secure in the knowledge that she did not.

"You know," I said—pulling myself up to all of my five foot five inches of stature—"I'm quite highly evolved." The senior editor looked a bit taken aback.

"In fact," I continued, "my parents were actually amphibians."

Her friends—who were in my peripheral vision—looked quizzically at me. The senior editor cocked her head slightly to one side and smiled skeptically, but in a way that suggested that she was intrigued by what she must have assumed to be an attempt on my part at a witty overture.

"Oh, really?" she said, a bit haughtily.

"Yes," I said, nodding confidently. "And when I was born no one really expected me to develop into anything more than a lizard . . . if that. And for a long time, that's exactly what I was. A small monitor lizard, actually, about this size."

I indicated with my hands a length of about eight inches. The senior editor forced a polite, stiff smile, as you might smile if you found yourself in an elevator with someone obviously psychotic, so as not to agitate him. Her friends giggled. The senior editor's smile softened slightly.

“I see,” she said. I continued.

“You see, for a long time I just went about my lizard life, down there in the Sonoran desert in Arizona—Arizona, that’s where I’m from originally. Anyway, there I was, living in the desert, doing what a monitor lizard does. In the morning, I’d crawl out from under my rock, climb up on top of it and wait for the sun to warm me. Lizards are cold-blooded, you know.”

The senior editor laughed stiffly. “Yes, so I’ve heard.”

“Well,” I continued, “I’d get warmed up after an hour or so in the sun and then just start doing my lizard thing. You see, we lizards didn’t think about the fact that we were lizards. We didn’t reflect on the experience of being lizards. We just did what our DNA made us do.”

The senior editor looked like she was trying to think of something to say, but before she could, I collared a waiter and ordered us all another round of drinks. A scotch sour for the senior editor, Lillet, on the rocks for her friends, and a vodka gimlet for me. As luck would have it, a table opened up and I suggested to the ladies that we make ourselves comfortable. I was careful to position myself next to the senior editor. I graciously held her chair for her and asked if the table was to her liking, which it was. She was appreciative of my attention and I felt that she was starting to notice me in a more significant and serious way. When she sat down, she seemed to do so almost in slow motion, so that every one of her moves was more noticeable to me. She crossed

her legs provocatively, revealing an expanse of undraped leg and thigh that made me reflect briefly on the utter splendor of the mammalian experience.

“So,” I continued, “after the sun had warmed me up enough, I’d walk around looking for something to eat, which was mostly insects, especially grasshoppers and beetles. When I’d see one, I’d freeze, open my mouth, then shoot out my long sticky tongue, grab the bug, and devour it. Like everything else in lizard life, I did this automatically, without really thinking about it. I didn’t even know—because at that stage I just didn’t have the capacity to know—that my tongue was, quote-unquote, *sticky*.” (I emphasized my point by making quote marks in the air with two fingers of each hand.) “But even then, I was aware, if only dimly, that there was something about my mouth and eating that was, well . . . just kind of strange. But at any rate, I’d eat and then walk around some more, just kind of loosening up, and then maybe get back on my rock and just sit there. And sooner or later some other male monitor lizard would come along and we’d have a confrontation, not about anything in particular, at least as far as I could tell, but just because we were both males and that’s just what you do when you encounter another male. You straighten out your legs so that you’re standing up higher, puff your body out real wide, open your mouth and hiss as loudly as you can.”

At this point I tried my best at imitating the display of a male monitor lizard. I stood up, arched forward so that my back was as convex as I could make it and extended my arms in front of me. Then, looking directly into the eyes of the senior editor, I opened my mouth to its maximum degree of extension and let out as loud a hissing sound as my mammalian vocal anatomy could produce. So loud, in fact, that I drew the attention of several revelers in the bar. The senior editor,

looking astonished and a bit frightened, drew back from me in her chair, her eyes wide. I repeated the vocalization and looked even more intently into her dark eyes. At that point, it seemed to me that her expression underwent a subtle transformation: from fear and astonishment to rapt attention. She put her drink on the table and uncrossed her legs. Her lips were parted and she was breathing deeply, as if slightly winded, her chest visibly rising and falling. Jack, who was among those who witnessed my display, rushed over and put his arm firmly around my shoulder.

“Peter, are you okay? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said with a calm smile. “I was just telling the ladies my story.” Jack looked at me oddly, paused for a moment, obviously trying to figure out what I was up to.

“Right,” he said. “Your story . . . your story. Right. Yeah. Okay. Okay.”

Then Jack gave me a friendly slap on the back and returned to the group he had been with before my display had distracted him. I continued.

“What usually happened after that was either that I would give up my rock and run away and find myself another rock, or the other male would run away and find *his* own rock. But the funny thing is that I can’t for the life of me say just what it was that determined the outcome. I don’t think it had much to do with who was bigger. Sometimes I would chase away a bigger

male and sometimes not. Each of us would just know what we were supposed to do. And it's not as if I felt *angry* with any of these other males. Not at all. In fact, I really didn't have any feelings toward them one way or the other. Isn't that strange?"

The senior editor was momentarily at a loss for words. But recovering quickly, she replied, thoughtfully, "Yes, I suppose it is kind of strange . . . I mean . . . if you think about it."

I continued: "And then maybe I'd just look around the area near my rock as if I were just waiting for something to happen. Now and then a female would come by and that would always get my attention."

"I'm sure it did," the senior editor said with a wry smile. She thought I was being flirtatious and provocative.

"But it wasn't in the way you think," I said. "You see, I'd get a whiff of the female's scent—female monitor lizards have this very particular scent that you could never mistake for anything else—and it was like a switch was flipped in my brain. I just acted, without having to think. Not that I really *could* think. But even if I could have thought, I would have been just overpowered by that scent."

"Talk about primitive," one of the senior editor's friends said sarcastically. But the senior editor just looked at me and said, "And then what?"

“Well, then I’d approach the female and sniff around her, and the females always did the same weird thing. They’d act as if they didn’t know what the hell was going on. They’d just turn around, flick their tails, and start to walk off. And all the while they’re doing this they’re giving off this scent, which just gets stronger and stronger and I’d just have to chase them. In a way, the whole thing was idiotic because we’d always end up mating, no matter how much the female pretended not to notice. But it was as if we were both reading from a script. The script says this is what you do, so that’s what we did. I mean we were goddamn lizards, for Chrissake! We didn’t think; we didn’t question. We just did what we did.”

Then the senior editor said, “You mean you were always successful with these females? None of them ever just refused to mate with you?”

“Well,” I replied, “you can’t really apply human standards, like ‘accepting’ or ‘rejecting,’ to lizards. It was the same routine every time. After I’d chased them enough every one of them would suddenly turn around and bite me hard on the nose, just like that.” I made a snapping motion with my teeth in the direction of the senior editor to show her what I meant. She pulled her head back, as if she thought I might actually bite her.

“And when I say hard I mean hard! My nose would always throb for a couple of days after one of those encounters. Then, as soon as she bit me I’d bite her back the same way—right on the nose—even harder. But then, instead of letting her go, I’d flip her a couple of feet, which seemed to take the fight out

of her and she'd raise her tail up real high—you'd be amazed how high a female monitor lizard can raise her tail—and boom! I'd pull myself up on top of her and we'd mate, just like that. I'd be in her for maybe ten seconds and that was it."

"Ten seconds. That sounds about right," another friend of the senior editor quipped sarcastically.

"Then, without so much as a how-do-you-do, the female would scamper off as though nothing had happened. I mean, she had what she came for—my sperm—right? Not much point in hanging around. It's not as if we could talk to each other. But the funny thing about it was that the scent of the female always lingered for a while after she was gone, so I'd keep sniffing around, trying to find her. It was really kind of pathetic when you think about it. An absolutely clueless male lizard sniffing the air for a female who's long gone. But eventually the scent would fade and I'd go back to my rock. Then at night I'd crawl back under my rock and sleep until the next day and pretty much the same thing would happen all over again."

The senior editor had put her hand lightly over her mouth, in a gesture that seemed to express astonishment rather than amusement. I asked her and her friends if they'd like another drink. The senior editor said she'd have whatever I was having. Her friends said, "Yeah, same thing here." So, I said to the waiter (who seemed to have been awaiting my order), "vodka gimlets all around."

The senior editor seemed more relaxed now. Her hair had come slightly undone, in a very beguiling sort of way. She put her

right foot up on the rung of my chair, which I found quite provocative, all the more so because of the slit skirt she was wearing. She was looking into my eyes.

“What happened then?” one of her friends asked.

“Well, for a while nothing really happened. But somehow—and don’t ask me how because I have to tell you I just don’t know—I felt¹/₄well, *restless* is the only way I can describe it. Now that I think about it, I realize how strange it must sound to think of a monitor lizard feeling restless. But there’s no other way I can put it. You see, in a primitive sort of way, I was beginning to ask myself, “is this all there is?” I mean, crawling out from under a rock every day, sitting in the sun to get warm, eating bugs, hissing at other males, getting bitten on the nose for no apparent reason, mating, going back under the rock and then doing the same thing the next day. It didn’t seem to bother the other lizards. I never sensed that they were questioning the whole thing, but something was happening inside of me that was beyond my control. I didn’t understand it at the time, because how could I? I was a lizard. But now I know what it was.”

“What was it?” the senior editor asked me, leaning toward me. I leaned toward her to answer and as I did so I accidentally brushed my leg against hers. I don’t know if it was a coincidence or not but when I leaned forward she seemed to take a little gulp and began to breathe more rapidly.

“Evolution,” I said.

“Evolution?” she replied.

“Exactly,” I said. “Evolution. I was evolving. I didn’t know it but I was evolving.”

“Evolving into what?” one of her friends asked.

“Yeah, evolving into what?” the senior editor asked.

It was only at that point that I realized that something of a crowd had gathered around us. They must have started paying attention when I had gotten up and hissed. Jack and his drinking buddies were there. The Senior Vice President for Legislative and Regulatory Affairs was also there, as were several hedge-fund managers and quite a few professional women too. I paused before answering.

“Well,” I said, “this is where it gets really interesting. One day, I was standing on my rock as usual, and I happened to look off into the distance. Now, you have to understand that that’s a very unusual thing for a monitor lizard to do. First of all, they don’t have very good vision; they rely more on smell to get around. And what vision they do have is short distance. The things that typically concern lizards are things close to them. They don’t need to worry about what’s going on a hundred yards away, much less miles away. But miles away is where I was looking. And I saw something that just somehow gripped me and drew my interest in a way that nothing had ever done before. Not threatening males, not bugs, not even females and their scent.”

“What was it? What did you see?” the senior editor asked, again leaning forward. And this time her leg pressed firmly against mine.

“Mountains. Far off in the distance. Big, bluish gray mountains with patches of snow near their peaks.” I paused for a moment to let the image sink in. I looked over at the senior editor’s friends to be polite. They were leaning forward too and waiting for me to go on.

“And then I just got down off my rock and started walking toward the mountains.”

“Just like that, you got down off your rock and started walking across the desert toward the mountains?” the senior editor asked.

“Yeah. Just like that. But I didn’t think to myself ‘I’m going to the mountains,’ because in the first place I didn’t know what mountains were, and I didn’t really think. You have to remember, I was a lizard. I was evolving but I was still a lizard. A lizard doesn’t think to himself: ‘I’m going to the mountains’ any more than he thinks ‘I’m going to mate with this female’ or ‘I’m going to face-off with this other male.’ It’s just that I was drawn to go off in the direction of what I saw, but without actually knowing what it was I was looking at or why I was going there.”

Jack was looking at me with some concern, although he didn't say anything. One of the hedge-fund managers was nodding rather oddly, as if he were trying to show sympathy or understanding or agreement. The Senior Vice President for Legislative and Regulatory Affairs turned to the attractive young woman next to him and, in a voice I could just make out, said: "I know exactly what he means." The young woman nodded earnestly and said "Yeah, tell me about it."

"So you mean you trekked across the desert all the way to the mountains?" one of the senior editors friends asked. "That must have been brutal!"

The senior editor, obviously annoyed at the interruption, said sharply and with a brusque wave of her hand, "Let him go on. Let him go on." Her friend looked a bit chastened and didn't say another word.

"Well," I replied, "the Sonoran desert is about 120 degrees in the summer, but I did my walking mostly in the morning and late afternoon when it wouldn't overheat my body. Fortunately, this was the weather I was used to and I could get whatever water I needed from the insects I ate and the occasional bite of cactus." The senior and several others in the gathering crowd nodded knowingly at this explanation.

"Eventually, I found myself going uphill, which was a totally new experience for me since the desert is completely flat. At first, I found it very disorienting. At one point I even started walking downhill, back toward the desert, as if I were thinking—which I couldn't since I was still a lizard—'get me

the hell out of here.'“ Everyone laughed at that point, except the senior editor, who just threw me a long, sweet smile.

“But whatever it was that had drawn me to the mountains was still drawing me. And so I just kept going up. And then things really started changing. First of all, the climate changes as you go up in the mountains. It was much harder for me to warm up in the morning sun than it had been in the desert. The sun isn't as strong, the air is cooler, and there can be clouds that block the sun completely. At first, this was a real problem for me, but after a while I started getting used to it. I was actually starting to become warm-blooded.”

There was a collective gasp from my audience. One of the senior editor's friends shook her head slowly in wonderment and in a hushed voiced said simply, “incredible.” The reaction that most affected me though (no surprise here) was from the senior editor herself. She leaned forward and grasped my left hand firmly in hers. She smiled again and then, in a muted, gentle voice, said, “Don't stop, Peter. I want to know everything.” So, I continued.

“As the days and weeks passed in the mountains, I became more and more at home in my new environment. First of all, my body continued to change and adapt. I grew larger; my legs became longer; my snout became shorter. Also, my skin started to smooth out and—I guess as an adaptation to the cooler climate—I started to develop a thin coat of hair. It wasn't really fur. It was hair-like, you could say, and it really helped me to be more comfortable, especially at night. I didn't have to sleep under a rock in order to keep warm, which was a great liberation for me.”

I smiled with this last remark, which elicited a lot of nods of understanding from the group. Some people said “sure” or “of course” or “it must have been.” I continued.

“At the same time that these physical changes were happening to me, I was also evolving mentally and emotionally.” (This remark elicited more ‘sures,’ ‘of courses,’ and even one or two ‘how-could-you-nots’.)

“For the first time in my life I started thinking about myself and the rest of the world. In a way, you could say that that’s when I first started smelling the roses.”

I noticed that the girlfriend of the Senior Vice President for Legislative and Regulatory Affairs was blotting a few tears from her eyes with a tissue. Her boyfriend put his arm warmly around her waist as she laid her head on his shoulder. A hedge-fund manager who had been standing took a seat and ordered a vodka gimlet. Jack was the only one in the crowd who seemed not to be moved by my story. He just stood there with his arms folded across his chest and a big grin on his face. Now and then he shook his head in apparent disbelief. He had taken an entire plate of mini-spring rolls from one of the waiters and was devouring them.

“Please go on,” the senior editor said. “I have to hear this to the end.”

“Yes, Peter. Please go on,” Jack added, still grinning broadly.

“Well, not long after that, one of the biggest events in my transformation took place. I was walking along the forest floor, gathering nuts and things like that—you see, my diet had changed as well—and I heard something up in a tree that got my attention, and when I looked up I saw . . . her.”

That elicited a mixture of sighs and sentimental ‘ohh’s from the group, the exception being Jack, who said rather loudly and skeptically, “Her? Who’s her?” He continued to devour his spring rolls and to smile broadly at me. He even pointed at the plate of spring rolls and then at me, to see if I wanted some. I said quietly, with a gentle shake of my head, “No thanks, Jack, I’m fine.”

With mention of the word “her” the senior editor seemed to well up with emotion. I continued.

“She was the most exquisite creature I had ever seen. She was about twice my size overall, with a beautiful coat of mostly black fur with a few white streaks. And she had the cutest little snout you can imagine, with little black whiskers that moved whenever she sniffed, which was most of the time. She was an opossum.”

The crowd—with the exception of Jack and the senior editor—emitted one long, collective, sentimental ‘Ohhh’, with several ‘How sweets’ added. The senior editor seemed to be the

only one who was troubled by the story. She withdrew her hand from mine, where it had been for quite a while, and took out a Kleenex from her purse to blot the tears that were filling her eyes. Jack, on the other hand, continued to smile broadly at me with delighted disbelief. He had polished off the spring rolls and moved on to a plate of Emmenthaler mini-quiches, which he was going at with great gusto. He again held up the plate, offering some to me and again I said "No thanks, Jack. I'm fine." I didn't want to lose the attention of my audience, so I quickly picked up where I had left off.

"She noticed me noticing her but she was clearly remaining aloof and cautious," I continued. "Which makes perfect sense, of course, when you think about it, because although I had started to look opossum-like, I wasn't an opossum yet, and let's face it, a female opossum isn't likely to be attracted to a male who looks like a lizard. But as the days and weeks passed and I continued to evolve, she gradually grew more comfortable with me. She let me approach her more closely. And after a while, we began to hang out together in the forest. We must have seemed like an unusual couple to the other animals. I looked a little like an opossum and a little like a monitor lizard. A lot of the animals were scared as hell of me and ran away as soon as they saw me. Even the predators got spooked when I was around. Anyway, I was very careful not to get . . . well, you know, aggressive with her because I was afraid I'd just scare her off. And the truth is that at first I didn't really know what I was supposed to do with her, how I was supposed to behave around her. For a while I even thought that maybe I was supposed to bite her nose and flip her over. But she was so much bigger than me that I never tried. Lucky for me, right? The only thing I really knew was that being close to her made me feel things that I had never felt before, things that I had never even imagined before. Of course, lizards don't really imagine anything, but you understand what

I mean.”

The senior editor nodded, along with everyone else, as she blotted her tears. Jack, on the other hand, just kept grinning at me in disbelief and shaking his head. He had moved on to the tempura and pointed at the plate and mouthed the word “delicious,” offering me some, but again I declined. He shrugged and continued to eat and grin at me.

“Well, things really got better from there, at least for a while. I eventually lost all my lizard features and became a full opossum. I had it all: fur, whiskers, the whole nine yards. And, naturally, I was completely warm-blooded.”

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At this point in my story I started to show more emotion. I took a deep breath and indicated to the waiter that I’d have a refill. The senior editor said “Maybe you shouldn’t, Peter. Maybe you’ve had enough.” I gave her hand a squeeze and flashed her a warm smile and assured her that I was okay. She smiled and squeezed my hand back.

“So, the female opossum and I were a pair. And for a while things were idyllic. But after a couple of months, I began to feel something very disturbing happening inside of me. At first, I suppressed it. In fact, I didn’t really recognize

what it was. But it had a disturbing familiarity to me, a kind of creepy déjà-vu. Then things started to become strained between us, in a funny sort of way.”

At this point, Jack interrupted: “Peter, what exactly happens when things become strained between two opossums? I mean, do you argue or fight or stop talking or what?”

I was a little annoyed with Jack for interrupting me with that question. And I wasn’t the only one who was annoyed. Jack’s executive assistant—Drayton-Elizabeth Kinsella-Barnes—was so annoyed with her boss that she snapped at him: “Jack, would you let the man talk please?” Jack shrugged bemusedly and, dipping the last of a plate of vegetable samosas in tamarind sauce, nodded at me with a wry smile and said, “Sure, Pete. Go ahead.” So, I continued.

“The estrangement between us was something that I felt on a visceral level. And in her own way, I know she did as well. Opossums may not be verbal, but I can tell you based on my own experience that they’re a lot more aware of the world and themselves than lizards. These things are communicated by body language and behavior.”

This remark elicited numerous expressions of understanding and assent. Drayton-Elizabeth Kinsella-Barnes shot Jack a sharp look and raised her eyebrows as if to say, ‘Are you satisfied now, Mr. Smarty-Pants?’

I paused a moment before continuing. I realized that I was

coming to the dénouement of my story and I wanted to pull it together while I still held everyone's interest. The senior editor, who had not taken her eyes off me, moved her chair closer to mine. After wiping away her tears, she took my hand again in hers. Her right leg and my left leg were now in more or less continuous contact, and not as the result of any effort on my part. So, I knew that I had to wrap it up pretty soon, and in a way that would leave everyone (especially the senior editor) satisfied, but at the same time wanting to hear more.

"So, as I was saying"—and at this point I shot a sharp glance at Jack—"this estrangement between me and my mate was just building and building for reasons that, at first, I didn't really understand. But then one day, in a flash, it was all suddenly clear. I knew what was happening."

I paused at this point to make sure I had everyone's attention. There was hardly a sound in the place.

"Evolution," I said, pausing to let the gravity of the word sink in. "I was continuing to evolve but she was not."

There were nods of recognition and understanding. The senior editor closed her eyes as if to take in all of the implications of what I had just told her. She nodded her head slowly and blotted more tears, which were now flowing freely down her cheeks.

"She was completely content to remain an opossum," I

explained. "The very idea of evolution had simply never dawned on her, even though she had witnessed first-hand my own transformation."

"Of course, of course," the senior editor repeated. She just didn't have that vision. It just wasn't part of her . . . her . . . "

"Natural endowment," I interjected.

"Yes, exactly, yes . . . yes . . . yes," the senior editor said. The last three 'yesses' were breathy and slow and were spoken with her eyes closed and her head tilted backward. I felt beads of sweat forming on my forehead and upper lip.

"So, I realized then that it had to end, that what was happening to me was a process that was completely beyond my power to stop, even if I wanted to stop it, which I didn't, and she just couldn't be with me in that process. If I had tried to stay with her it would have become . . . well, unnatural. So, I had to move on."

I paused again to let it all sink in for a moment. Jack's mouth was wide open in disbelief. I saw him silently mouth the words "Fucking unbelievable."

"There's a lot more to tell, of course, but I'm sure you can understand how difficult some of it is to relate and, to tell you the truth, I'm a little tired right now."

There were numerous, very sympathetic nods and comments of understanding. The senior editor again grasped my hand tightly in hers and pressed it tenderly to her lips and said to me "Of course you're tired, Pete; of course you're tired. You need to rest."

Jack had slumped into a chair. He looked quite pale. Evidently, he was feeling ill from having eaten so much. I would have gotten up immediately and gone over to him to make sure he was all right, but I didn't want to take my hand away from the senior editor until she was through caressing it. After a minute or so she let my hand go to fix her make-up and I told her that I wanted to check on my friend because he seemed not to be feeling well.

"You're a good friend to him, aren't you?"

"Well," I said reflectively, "Jack is a very special guy."

"He must be, if he's a friend of yours," the senior editor said.

I smiled at her and went over to Jack. He looked up at me from his chair, shook his head, and said: "Fucking unbelievable."

"Are you all right, Jack? You look a little pale. Maybe something you ate didn't agree with you."

“Fucking unbelievable,” he said again.

I gave him a solid pat on the back and said, “We’ll talk.” As I walked back to the senior editor, who had meanwhile removed all trace of tears and reapplied her lip-gloss, I heard one more “fucking unbelievable” from Jack. The crowd was thinning out and a number of people stopped to shake my hand and tell me how moved they had been by my story. The Senior Vice President for Legislative and Regulatory Affairs, a tall, handsome, athletic-looking man, shook my hand with particular vigor and said, with obvious sincerity, “You’re an amazing person, just an amazing person. Thank you for sharing that with us.” I thanked him and told him it was a pleasure to have told my story to him and to the rest of the group. Quite a few others also wanted to shake my hand and tell me how moved they had been by my story and, of course, I accommodated them and thanked them for their interest and their expressions of admiration. After shaking the last hand in what seemed like one long receiving line, I turned to the senior editor, who had not left my side, and said, “I’d like to get something to eat and I’d like it very much if you would come with me.”

“Of course I’ll come with you, Pete,” she said warmly, looking deeply into my eyes. “Of course I will.”

Then we looked at each other and kissed a soft, tender kiss. As we walked to the door, I took one last look over my shoulder at Jack. He was too far away for me to hear his voice but I could still read his lips: “Fucking unbelievable.”

The senior editor and I walked out into the warm Manhattan air. She took my arm with both of her hands and drew herself close to me. It was the first day of summer and the setting sun bathed the city with an exquisite orange glow. We headed west. I didn't know just where we were going or what awaited us, but I knew we were going in the right direction.

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Peter Lopatin was born and raised in New York where he earned his JD degree and practiced corporate law for thirty years. Along the way, he studied philosophy as a graduate student at the New School for Social Research. After retiring from his legal practice, he obtained a Certificate from the New School in teaching English as a Second Language and has been an ESL teacher since then. He has taught at the University of Connecticut/Stamford, Norwalk Community College, Manhattanville College and, most recently, at the Stamford English Language Academy. Peter's short stories and book reviews have appeared in *Commentary*, *The Weekly Standard*, *The New Atlantis*, and *New English Review*. His poetry has appeared in *New Millennium Writings* and *Poetry East*.

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