



Flirting With Danger

She's married.
So's he. Yet sparks fly.
Can close friends
become *too* close?

BY IRIS KRASNOW

I

AM HAVING LUNCH WITH
a smart and funny man who

makes me feel young and unencumbered, even though I am neither (I'm 56, and my body has weathered the birth of four sons). He is tall, with a slight bulge at the belly and wispy white hair. I see instead a taut 24-year-old with wavy blond hair and a boyish grin. I dated him briefly after college, but never slept with him. For more than three decades, the two of us have enjoyed a friendship that is flirty and unwavering. "You look the same as the day I met you," he often says, recalling a Friday-night party in 1977 to which I wore a velvet

maxiskirt and lizard-skin cowboy boots. He is lying, but—swelled by sweet and addictive affirmations not readily available at home, where my husband and I share teenagers and bills—I believe him. So during one lunch every month or so, my old friend and I remember together who we were: flat-bellied singles drinking Labatts on Oak Street Beach until dawn shimmered over Lake Michigan. We have a crackle and connection that is unrivaled by any of our other relationships, anchored by roots and an unrequited attraction.

We are also both in lengthy marriages with spouses who are flexible, confident, and aware of this simple truth: Every time we see each other, we come home in spunkier moods.

“Old friendships bear witness to your life in its entirety,” says Chicago psychotherapist Carol Moss, coauthor of *A Woman’s Search for Inner Peace*. “And if you are a heterosexual woman, having this friend be a man makes those memories even more intense. From the work that I do, I really think that’s all we want in our relationships—to be truly known.”

The ancient art of flirting, defined as “behaving amorously without serious intent,” is easy to do, sexy without the sex, and enormous fun. In old boyfriends we find our history holders; in new men friends we get the endorphin rush of a first date. Gone is the cultural stereotype of male bosses attended by flirty secretaries in décolletage. The modern reality is that female executives, many in their own plunging necklines, now hold growing numbers of the highest-earning jobs in the United States, giving them equal opportunities to meet intriguing members of the opposite sex, in boardrooms and all over Facebook.

A 57-year-old woman in Encinitas, California, recently rediscovered a male coworker from a job she left six

months ago. Divorced since 1984, she’s been in a committed relationship since 2002. But when this “pudgy, brilliant guy” from her past sent her a friend request, she accepted at once. “I remembered how he made me laugh harder than anyone else,” she explains. “He was someone with whom I found myself effortlessly sharing stories about my ex-husband, my frustrations over juggling grandchildren visitations, and my disap-

only if you set clear boundaries,” says psychotherapist Moss, who specializes in counseling couples. “You each need to know you are not going to cross the line, even if the desire is there. It takes a real grownup to achieve this: psychological and spiritual integration, the blending of ego and your integrity.”

Keeping an admiring male—or female—in the platonic category can be particularly trying when a primary

No matter how happily a woman may be married, it always pleases her to discover that there is a nice man who wishes that she were not.

—H.L. MENCKEN

pointments about the man I live with.

“He listened without interruption, then offered some really good advice. Now that we’re in a cozy, revived friendship, our challenge is this: How do we navigate our relationship without crossing the line? I love my boyfriend, but he’s a really serious person who doesn’t like to engage in emotional reflection. This little flirtation gives me an enormous boost.”

Indeed, flirty friendships lift us from the malaise that accompanies the grind of ordinary life. They provide an oasis from financial pressures and family stress. We get to remain men and women of mystery—alluring, unconquered, uncomplicated. Yet for all their perks, these liaisons also pose distinct challenges, even dangers.

“A flirty friendship on the side of a committed relationship is healthy

relationship hits a maddening turn. Distressed and lonely, we are in a heightened state of vulnerability to new romantic attachments.

A 60-year-old public relations executive from Los Angeles is seeking solace from the “dark moods” of her out-of-work husband in a new client who radiates light and optimism. “I haven’t had a crush like this since I was 17,” she confesses. “Last week we went to an opening at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. We stood together eating delicious hors d’oeuvres, surrounded by beautiful paintings. I felt like I was the prettiest and the wittiest woman in the world.

“My husband is in the construction business, and he has been unemployed for two years,” she continues. “We used to go to fine restaurants and openings. Now he rarely wants to

leave the house. I am not abandoning him, believe me, but I can't abandon my own needs either. So far my flirtation is innocent, but I admit I have sexual fantasies about this man. He has awakened something in me that has been asleep, and I realize I may be headed for trouble."

This PR exec says she is "enamored, but not discombobulated." You enter the danger zone in a flirty friendship when sporadic thoughts of this man (or woman) become an aching obsession, when a few hours without an e-mail set off a panic attack. This is an affair, even if there's no sex.

Therapist Robin McMahon of London suggests using this tug of the heart to examine what is missing at home—and try to fix it. "I can't really justify a flirty friendship as something that always fortifies a long relationship," says McMahon, "except insofar as it brings to the surface some of the issues that need to be worked through by both partners. These issues may be: Where does the flirtation end? Do I satisfy you in the bedroom? Does the flirtation build your esteem and make you want me more, or does it take precedence over me? Do we still love each other? Is there damage between us that needs repair? These questions might then provide a framework so that deeper issues in the relationship can be explored directly and honestly."

Men and women approach flirty friendships from different angles, of course. Most women strike up a friendship with a man because he stimulates her emotions, which are a female's biggest erogenous zone. Guys...well, the stereotype seems to be true: They become friends with women who stimulate a response below the belt, a fact corroborated by research on cross-sex friendships.

I'm talking to a 50-year-old woman who has a "mad crush" on the divorced father of one of her daughter's



friends. Their lengthy and unspoken attraction led to a spicy encounter at a small dinner party at her home—an encounter she admits was "sorta bad." The woman had excused herself from the table to fetch a bottle of wine from the cellar. On her way, the bathroom door opened, and out walked the divorcé. He followed her down to the basement and closed the door.

"We kissed for one minute, a hard and wonderful kiss," she recalls in a wheezy whisper. "He picked me up off the floor and hugged me so hard my back cracked. Then he straightened his tie, winked at me, and left me at the wine rack. I was so flustered that when I got back, I forgot to serve the salad."

Two years later, that naughty mo-

ment remains a seductive memory the woman knows must play out only in her imagination. She doesn't want to jeopardize a 28-year marriage she considers "solid and satisfying."

But hey—a girl can have her dreams. "I totally avoid him now," she says. "If he asked me out for coffee, I'm afraid I would go—and then what? Best to leave him in my fantasies. But I'll always have that stolen kiss. It's like I have a gold coin in my back pocket." ■

Iris Krasnow's new book, The Secret Lives of Wives: Women Share What It Really Takes to Stay Married, explores flirty friendships and other common relationship challenges. She is a journalism professor at American University.