

# Enough With the Incels! A Literary Cry for Help From Female Insings (Involuntary Single)

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Modern mating markets relegate a growing number of men to being incels (involuntary celibate). Increasing attention befalls another group struggling in the same markets: female insings (involuntary single). In the partly autobiographical novel, *Half of Malmö Consists of Guys Who Dumped Me* (2021), Amanda Romare dramatizes how urban dating and technologies like Tinder exploit women's evolved mate preferences in a manner that drives addiction and dysfunction. Many women have practically unlimited access to serial dating and short-term sex with highly attractive men, but such experiences can leave women less able to calibrate their mating strategies, thus making it harder to acquire a long-term partner. Romare argues that incels get too much attention, as our culture blinds us to the plight of lonely women. To investigate the insing phenomenon, we apply sexual strategies theory, sexual conflict theory, and other frameworks from evolutionary psychology. Mismatch, conflicting desires, and exploitative technologies make many women prioritize mate qualities that misalign with their pair-bonding ambitions. Juxtaposing Romare's novel with the TV series *Sigurd Can't Get Laid* (2020–2022) aids us in comparing insings to incels. Our analysis illustrates how both groups fall victim to our evolved mate preferences. Communities that develop a better understanding of these preferences could improve intersexual communication, which might help them find more productive ways to mate.

## **Public Significance Statement**

Our two fictional case studies illuminate why an alarming number of youths are opting out of both short- and long-term mating. High singledom and sexual inactivity may contribute to our era's impending demographic collapse, which threatens social stability and human prospering. Analyzing fictional portrayals of dating dysfunction through the lens of evolutionary psychology could generate insights that help individuals and communities progress past our current malaise.

**Keywords:** evolutionary literary criticism, mating mismatch, dating, demographic collapse, sexual strategies theory

In the past decade, involuntary celibate (incels) men gained public notoriety after the terrorist attacks of a few extremists (Costello & Buss,

2023; Tietjen & Tirkkonen, 2023). Scholars are making sense of the incel phenomenon (e.g., Baselic, 2022; Blake & Brooks, 2023; Brooks,

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Russo-Batterham, et al., 2022; Costello et al., 2022, 2023; Hoffman et al., 2020; Räsänen, 2023; Sparks et al., 2022, 2024)—for instance, through explaining why, when men’s and women’s evolved mate preferences play out in the modern West, the lowest-value men become excluded from mating. Incels have been common throughout most of human history (Larsen, 2023c, 2023d). The early-second-millennium Church’s imposition of life-long monogamy restrained *Homo sapiens*’ bias for polygyny and hindered women from channeling mating opportunities predominantly to the highest-value men (Larsen, 2022, 2023b). This unique regime drove a sexual egalitarianism that peaked in the post-World War II environment with nearly universal marriage (Coontz, 2005).

Life-long monogamy was socially beneficial, but poorly aligned with human mating nature (Henrich, 2020). With the 18th-century transition away from parental choice, Western mating was set on a path that would empower individuals to pursue mating in a manner more aligned with their evolved preferences (Apostolou, 2017). In the 21st century—partly as a result of mismatch (Biegler & Kennair, 2016)—this novel mating regime contributes to increasing singledom and sexual inactivity (Berglöff, 2021; BRC, 2023; Fry & Parker, 2021; Ingraham, 2019; Ueda et al., 2020). A reduction in sex and pair bonding seems to contribute to this century’s drastic decrease in fertility, which some consider to be a paramount threat to civilization (Bainbridge, 2009; Chen et al., 2019; Eberstadt, 2021; Musk, 2021; Zeihan, 2022).

The fact that most Western women no longer are materially or morally dependent on being in a long-term relationship motivates them to exclude the least compelling men from their pool of potential pair-bonding candidates. Gender equality and economic inequality drive women to focus their mate attraction efforts on a shrinking proportion of men (Brooks, Blake, et al., 2022). Sex differences in mate preferences empower women in short-term markets, giving them practically unlimited access to casual sex with higher-value men (Buss & Schmitt, 2011). Less restrained by monogamous mating morality—and given access to larger, more accessible short-term markets through technologies like Tinder—many women can serially date the small percentage of men whom they perceive to be the most attractive. These men generally find promiscuous mating to be rewarding, but many of their female partners

are often left sexually unsatisfied and with negative emotions and regret (Campbell, 2008; Fernandes et al., 2016; Kennair & Bendixen, 2018; Kennair et al., 2016, 2018). This point should not be exaggerated; for instance, the stereotype of promiscuous women having low self-esteem is unfounded (Krems et al., 2021). For the small proportion of women whose genuine preference is promiscuous mating, today’s markets confer an exceptional level of privilege in terms of access to higher-value men. But since women in general are more oriented toward committed relationships, promiscuity is for many a poor replacement for pair bonding (Buss & Schmitt, 2011). Many women thus experience that modern mating markets relegate them to being involuntary single (insings).

A growing number of female scholars and intellectuals demand attention to how today’s mating practices also marginalize women (e.g., Harrington, 2023; Illouz, 2019; Perry, 2022). Amanda Romare offers an honest, gut-wrenching portrayal of insing victimization in her partly autobiographical *Half of Malmö Consists of Guys Who Dumped Me* (*Halva Malmö består av killar som dumpat mig*, Romare, 2021; hereafter *Half of Malmö*). The Swedish novel centers on 31-year-old Amanda who expresses that she wants to acquire a long-term partner, but ends up having sex with a large number of attractive men who never ask her for a second date. The novel inspired a rich debate through which women spoke up about their mating struggles. Axfors (2022) wrote,

Women are disadvantaged on today’s dating market, according to the sociologist Eva Illouz. Which is cool, for you think that it should be the opposite, considering how much incels complain. But exactly like men still have the economic power, they have the relational power because they have more choices and not as high expectations.<sup>1</sup>

Romare, too, rejected the claim that women have more power in mating markets: “I find the opposite. My impression is that guys more often swipe right on Tinder, meaning that guys are more interested in getting a first date, but when it comes to second and third dates they withdraw” (Stokstad, 2021). Romare had had enough of incels getting all the media attention: “Yet again men have made everything be about

<sup>1</sup> Our translation of all works referenced in non-English languages.

them, but there are many lonely women out there about whom no one is talking” (Kuhlin, 2021). Attacking the incel discourse, Barr (2022) referred to it as a “murderous conspiracy” when men claim to be sexually excluded.

A Norwegian TV series, *Sigurd Can't Get Laid* (Sigurd f kke pult, 2020–2022; hereafter *Sigurd*), triggered the expression of similar views. Nossen (2020) found its title to degrade women and promote the idea that men are entitled to sex. Rustad (2020) insisted that the title was misguided since the incel protagonist’s problem had to be depression and not celibacy. We should take struggling men seriously, she wrote, but to connect their problems “to a lack of sex only contributes to toxic masculinity.” Not all attention was negative toward incels. The ensuing debate gave the impression that some cultures, perhaps especially the progressive Scandinavian ones, are ready to investigate mating stratification more soberly.<sup>2</sup> Hammer (2020), Kamran (2020), Krogh and Choi (2020), and Stavik (2020) all encouraged that people try to garner greater sympathy for struggling young men, but their opinion pieces did not dig deeper into the mechanisms that contribute to male marginalization.

In this article, we apply sexual strategies theory, sexual conflict theory, evolutionary mismatch theory, and other frameworks from evolutionary psychology to investigate several dysfunctional and maladaptive aspects of today’s mating practices, which are insightfully portrayed in *Half of Malm * and *Sigurd*. Applying these tools in the analysis of our two fictional case studies helps us illuminate how the incel and insing phenomena are related.

Our primary concern is to investigate the struggles of insings, as these have been under-researched. This portmanteau exists on the internet, but in many mating debates, including those around *Half of Malm *, such women have been referred to as “female incels” (K ljing, 2022; Romare, 2022a), a term that does not describe their challenges. Although women have a power advantage in short-term markets that gives them abundant access to male sexuality, the complexity of female mate preferences makes this access, for some women, only a theoretical advantage. Incel women exist (Evans & Lankford, 2024), but this article does not investigate these. Romare has been uncomfortable referring to herself as a female incel, which she has done due to a lack of more

descriptive terms (Stokstad, 2021). We therefore propose the term insings for women with easy access to dating and sex, but who are unable to fulfill their expressed desire for a pair bond.

The main intention of this article is to develop insights that can be helpful for women who struggle in our era’s mating markets. Our ambitions are also societal. We believe that frameworks from evolutionary psychology can help communities better understand why modern dating is becoming more dysfunctional and empower people to conceive of and experiment with more adaptive mating practices.

### Thirty Thousand Swipes Away From Mating

*Sigurd*’s four seasons chronicle its protagonist’s journey away from being a socially isolated, depressed incel. Twenty-five-year-old Sigurd loses his virginity at the end of Season 2, explores the challenges of pair bonding in Season 3, and becomes a somewhat capable courter of women in Season 4. The series ends with him being pair-bonded with a woman who bears his child. Especially Season 1 was critically praised for exploring a sensitive and controversial topic in a funny, accessible way. The series was compared to *Seinfeld* for its awkward everyday comedy (Vik, 2021), and Woody Allen’s films for its existential take on sex (Spigseth, 2020). A newspaper for urbanites awarded Season 1 “TV Series of the Year” (Natt&Dag, 2021).

Sigurd is an exceptionally disadvantaged protagonist, a type of super underdog particularly dear to Scandinavian audiences (Larsen, 2021, 2023a). He lacks much of what attracts women to a man, especially in short-term markets. He is not good-looking, has low self-esteem, few material resources, and a small social circle. His poor social skills, especially his shy awkwardness, are a particular burden in the modern mating regime of individual choice (Apostolou, 2017). Had he lived centuries earlier, someone with his traits, skills, and social standing would

<sup>2</sup> Similar to how the Nordic countries often took a lead in the move toward female equality, they have begun to take men’s struggles more seriously. The Norwegian government has researched the dynamics of male marginalization in the 21st century, but without engendering significant insights (St.meld. 8, 2008; NOU 3, 2019). A third effort is underway, although the Minister who initiated this new “Men’s Panel” showed no greater imagination than to ask that “men and women should be feminists together” (Karlsen, 2021).

still have had low mate value. But such men, due to a higher marriage rate, had a better chance of securing a long-term pair bond. Sigurd's parents likely would have arranged a marriage with a woman whom they thought was a suitable match. Today, men like him suffer involuntary celibacy, at least periodically, because they avoid, or fail at, the social interactions that typically lead to copulation and pair bonding.

In the first episode, Sigurd's dramaturgical call to action occurs when he realizes just how low of a mate value women assign him, and how poor his quality of life will be if he remains unable to attract a partner. In his job as a mobile phone repairer, he misinterprets a female customer's social niceties. Unlike women, men commonly overperceive signals of interest (Bendixen et al., 2019; Haselton, 2003; Haselton & Buss, 2000). When Sigurd suggests that he return the phone to her in a bar where they can drink beer, she angrily reports him to his colleague. That someone with such minuscule mate value would consider her a potential mate seems to make graver the affront. Sigurd's female colleague salvages the situation. When he asks how she pulled that off, the colleague admits, "I said you were retarded" (1-1-6).<sup>3</sup> Crestfallen, Sigurd concludes that his expressing romantic interest to a woman would only be acceptable if he suffered an intellectual disability. The scene conveys how women are incentivized to reject low-value men in a manner that imposes pain on them in order to encourage more adaptive behavior. The woman's seemingly cruel rejection ends up having this effect on Sigurd. He realizes that his current self appears erotically and romantically worthless to the vast majority of women.

Sigurd at first adopts the deterministic beliefs common in incel forums, that genetics are so important that certain men have no chance of becoming sexually active or pair-bonded (Bachaud & Johns, 2023; Sparks et al., 2024). Like single men in general, he overestimates the importance of physical attractiveness and underestimates the importance of intelligence, kindness, and humor (Costello et al., 2023; Whyte et al., 2016). Audiences are encouraged to sympathize with Sigurd's plight, but also see that his efforts have been suboptimal. He may not be an Adonis, but if he worked on his appearance and social skills, Sigurd's genetics should not exclude him from pair bonding with women of

similar mate value. He does not fall prey to incel ideology to such an extent that he gives up. Instead, Sigurd gains hope after meeting a *doppelgänger* whose social skills attract women. This man also used to be an incel but succeeded in transforming himself. He encourages, "Men like us can't just wank off all life. We must have sex, right?... The old me [was also a gamer]. I am no longer that person. I have grown up. People like that don't get laid" (1-4-16). Sigurd accepts this ally's call to action by signing up for Tinder, the app that has come to symbolize our era's new dating practices.

Apostolou's (2017) work on mismatch informs why Sigurd is unlikely to succeed on Tinder, which predominantly distributes casual sex. Through humanity's forager and agricultural phases, family and kin wielded considerable power over mate choice. *Homo sapiens* was "the only species on the planet where males are selected by other males for reproductive purposes" (Apostolou, 2010, p. 46). Traits were selected for that helped men win favor with in-laws, such as being reliable providers and good long-term partners. A woman and her parents have overlapping interests, but there are also genetic conflicts (Kennair & Biegler, 2017). The woman will benefit more from getting good genes from an attractive man than what her parents will. If he proves to be a bad provider, she may have to seek help from her parents, which poses a burden on them. Being perceived as sexy was therefore less of an advantage when parents had a strong say in spouse selection. Until the past centuries, there was less pressure on men to have attractive looks and good flirting skills.

Women too seem suboptimally evolved for long-term markets. Apostolou et al. (2023) found that 57% of men and women have difficulties in starting and/or keeping a relationship. In short-term markets, many men struggle to attract women. Buss (2021) proposed that 20% of men are sufficiently compelling to succeed with short-term mating. The longitudinal study of Harper et al. (2017) indicated that this stratification is becoming stronger. From 2002 to 2011–2013, the top 5% of men increased their number of sex partners by 32%. An equivalent reduction in sex partners occurred among the lower-value men. Norwegian studies attest to a similar

<sup>3</sup> In parenthesis after quotations from the TV series, we list season, episode, and minute range. Translations are ours.

stratification (Seksualvaneundersøkelsen, 2020; Træen et al., 2003). A 2015 study suggested that there could be a 20:80 distribution among men on Tinder (Medium, 2015), but this might no longer be the case. In 2014, men swiped right three times as often as women did, 46% and 14%, respectively (Bilton, 2014). In 2021, this discrepancy had increased to an order of magnitude: 53% versus 5% (Gerrard, 2021). Neyt et al. (2019) found similar numbers: 62% and 4.5%. Even the dating app Hinge, designed to be more equitable, channels 41% of women's likes to the top 5% of men, while the bottom 50% receive 4% (Goldgeier, 2017). Jonason and Thomas (2022) confirmed the highly iniquitous dynamics of online mating markets.

Sigurd chances on Tinder are small, as is the case for most men. The series' creators emphasize how powerless and exploitable the lowest-value men are by having Sigurd's first match be part of a scam that ends with him being robbed. For men of average attractiveness, studies suggest that they must spend an extraordinary amount of time swiping to earn dates or mating opportunities. Gerrard (2021) cited how the median man had to swipe 100 times to get one match. Grøntvedt et al. (2020) found that 57 matches were required for one meetup and that around five meetups were required for sex or a relationship to be the outcome. These studies approached Tinder data differently, so combining their findings is statistically questionable. Yet, how their data suggest that the median man must swipe through almost 30,000 female profiles to achieve short- or long-term mating, at a minimum tells us that—for most men—Tinder is an ineffective mating arena.

### Comparing Mating Victimization

The series' creators argue against deterministic incel ideology by depicting how, with much effort, men like Sigurd can become sufficiently attractive to earn copulation and pair bonding, even with today's Western women. After working on his looks and skills, and suffering numerous failures, Sigurd finally gets to have sex after a date at the end of Season 2. Season 3 explores how there might still be harmful consequences from how men with low short-term mate value are so strongly discriminated against about promiscuous sex. The fact that modern dating dynamics incentivize women to channel sexual

opportunities mostly to the highest-value men could contribute to dysfunction in long-term markets.

After Sigurd has become more socially capable and confident, he gets to pair bond with Josefin. She is an attractive woman with whom he envisions a future. But because Sigurd feels that women have deprived him of sex until now, he does not consider it immoral to cheat on his first-ever girlfriend. He views himself as a victim of systemic discrimination and thus entitled to a form of affirmative action. To his friend Mats, Sigurd explains that men have always offered Josefin sex, while “only now people have become interested in having sex with me ... It is so incredibly unfair that I have to stop because she is satisfied. I have to grab the opportunities I have” (3-7-15-6). Sigurd is unable to convince Josefin that he deserves to have sex with others while in a relationship with her. He reminds her that she has “had 15 boyfriends [and also] slept around” (3-4-18). Having had only three sex partners, Sigurd feels he “cannot grow old and have had sex with [so few]” (3-8-1).

The post-1968 mating ideology of confluent love contributes to how Sigurd feels that an important part of self-realization is not only to be found in committed relationships but also through casual sex (Giddens, 1992; Shorter, 1975). This ideology of convenience and individualistic reward promotes serial monogamy interspersed with opportunistic, short-term mating. A belief in confluent love has taken hold of Western populations during the same period as individual choice empowered women to exclude the lowest-value men from mating. Not only does this societal evolution impose existential pain on men unable to live up to cultural ideals, but also some of them respond maladaptively. Yong et al. (2023) found that men with low mate value, instead of accepting that an assortative, long-term strategy is their best bet, approach mating markets with unrealistic expectations. Those men who do get into pair bond may also suffer increased psychological pressures. Strong sex partner stratification between men makes it so that many relationships will be like that of Sigurd and Josefin, in that the woman will be the most sexually experienced. Considering men's sexual jealousy (Buss et al., 1992; Daly et al., 1982; Wilson & Daly, 1992), their greater desire for partner variety (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Clark & Hatfield, 1989; Schmitt, 2005b),



and the promiscuous ideals of confluent love, our era's mating stratification could contribute to greater friction within a relationship.

The series' creators make a case for how poor intersexual communication—as a result of men and women not understanding how the sexes face different mating challenges—contributes to breakups and singledom. Josefin becomes furious when Sigurd admits to having cheated. She refuses to sympathize with his sexual marginalization, and he doesn't care that she has suffered similar victimization as Amanda in *Half of Malmö*. Josefin had admitted with regard to her former boyfriends: "I find an asshole, then we break up, and then I find a new asshole. Are you an asshole?" (3-2-13). She agreed to pair bond with Sigurd because he is not. By "asshole," she seems to mean an attractive man who mates long- and short-term at the same time. Josefin exemplifies the burden that can befall women who get to pair bond with the most sought-after mates. Men with sexual opportunity typically become more short-term oriented (Goetz et al., 2019), which can motivate them to cheat even after having agreed to be in a closed relationship.

Josefin had not been an insing. Attractive men pair-bonded with her, but their cheating caused her to adjust the value she assigns different traits in potential partners, further upvaluing men who convincingly signal long-term commitment. She makes this point when she throws Sigurd out of her life: "The whole point of you is that you don't do things like that! If I am to have a boyfriend who fucks others, he might as well be good-looking." She seems to have accepted Sigurd as a boyfriend whom she considers to have lower mate value, as a compromise that he should understand excludes him from pursuing short-term opportunities. Their exchange attests to how "the fundamental conflict of interest between the sexes prohibits so-called 'true love' [due to] constant exploitation by both partners" (Chang et al., 2017, p. 199). Sexual conflict theory illuminates the respective positions of Josefin and Sigurd:

Sexual conflict may be defined as conflict between the evolutionary interests of individuals of the two sexes. There are conflicts over resources that ensue because females and males follow different ideal strategies that may increase their own fitness at a cost to their mating partner. (Kennair, Grøntvedt, et al., 2023)

Josefin had desired a stable, monogamous pair bond, while Sigurd desired partner variety—a

predictable conflict due to differences in male and female mate preferences (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Clark & Hatfield, 1989; Kennair, Grøntvedt, et al., 2022; Kennair et al., 2012; Schmitt, 2005b). Having faced distinct evolutionary pressures, men and women not only have conflicts of interest but also so different psychologies that empathy can be hindered by poor cross-sex theory of mind. Sigurd is similarly unwilling to sympathize with Josefin's painful experiences on modern mating markets—because they are so different from his. He acts maladaptively by ignoring her admission, insisting on the greater relevance of his victimhood: "I'm so damned tired of relating to a fucking whore. You fucked so much that it gets stuck in my throat. You have to listen to me" (3-8-9-10). Her greater mate value could contribute to his jealous insecurity, which expresses itself as hateful attacks (French et al., 2017). Since neither of them is willing to step out of their emotions and perspective to sympathize with the other's mating victimization, their relationship ends.

By having Sigurd eventually do what is adaptive, the series encourages low-value men to accept their plight. He still desires to accumulate sexual experience with additional partners, but doubts whether he will be able to do so to an extent that justifies the effort. Mats encourages him to mimic the behavior of men who are so attractive that they can have a relationship and also sleep around. Jonason and Buss (2012) accounted for how such men adopt tactics that let them avoid burdensome entanglements that could hinder their short-term strategies. With high access to new partners, high-value men "can afford to keep relationships purely casual more than can those lower in mate-value" (p. 607). Sigurd concludes that his mate value could never become sufficiently high to support such a strategy; he does not "feel that he is that kind of guy" (3-7-13). The realization that he will never be attractive enough to have significant success in short-term markets makes him adopt a long-term orientation. His decision exemplifies how mating stratification also can have a positive effect on pair bonding. Low-value men can become more motivated to commit, as they lack sexual opportunity outside of relationships. In his next pair bond, Sigurd accepts that the price of long-term intimacy and family life is to forego short-term opportunities—even if such restrictions on men with low short-term mate value can feel unfair.

With this happy, prosocial ending, the series' creators reject the validity of incel demands regarding compensation for systemic discrimination. Our evolved psychologies make it so that, in the modern West, women have far easier access to casual sex, an advantage they use to channel a disproportionate amount of sexual opportunity to the most attractive men. Sigurd may view himself as a victim who is entitled to affirmative action, but the series creators are unwilling to entertain what it would require to achieve a more sexually egalitarian social order in the 21st century. Their ending tells marginalized men to work hard to increase their mate value so that they have a better chance of earning a monogamous relationship in the future.

### Dating as Self-Harm

The *Half of Malmö*-protagonist's journey from being an insing to being pair-bonded mirrors that of the author. When Amanda Romare turned 30, "she started serial dating, using both the Tinder app and analogue bar hookups, thinking 5–6 dates would suffice to find someone with whom she could spend a considerable part of her life" (Kuhlin, 2021). Two years later, she had had sex with so many men, she writes in the novel, that this would be the primary regret on her deathbed.<sup>4</sup> Not a single one of them had invited her to a second date.

Romare experienced a negative emotion that is common for women after casual sex: regret (Campbell, 2008; Fernandes et al., 2016; Kennair & Bendixen, 2018; Kennair et al., 2016, 2018). Informed by men's smaller obligatory parental investment, men evolved a mating psychology that can make promiscuity highly rewarding (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Clark & Hatfield, 1989). Women can also benefit from mating with multiple mates (Scelza, 2013), but female psychology evolved defenses against mating practices that would be unlikely to provide an offspring with good genes or paternal investment (Buss, 2017). Women evolved a desire for short-term mating predominantly with the most attractive men (Buss & Barnes, 1986; Schmitt, 2005a), although they can be drawn to men with lower short-term appeal if these men signal commitment (Buss, 2016; Luoto, 2019; Walter et al., 2020). Romare's sense of regret resulted from her feeling sexually exploited by men who later showed no interest in fulfilling her desire for a pair bond.

Sexual strategies theory posits that the discordant pressures on hominin males and females explain why men and women pursue distinct strategies for short- and long-term mating, some of which incentivize intersex cooperation while others drive competition (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). When Romare experienced postcoital regret, she had fallen prey to the short-term strategies of sexually attractive men. Tinder and the urban bar scene gave her access to the most compelling men, but only for casual sex. The men's short-term orientation and her lower long-term mate value made pair bonding an unlikely outcome. Her strategies could also make her come across as short-term oriented. In her novel and interviews, Romare has shown a limited understanding of these mechanisms. Her subjective experience was that

serial dating is a form of self-harm. You are not rejected for something you say or think, but for how you are as a person. You show yourself from your best side on a date—you are funny and social, have dressed up, and have sex. It is so incredibly intimate and vulnerable. I really gave it my all every time, and still no one wanted me. (Kuhlin, 2021)

Romare took notes during this period as a form of self-therapy. She turned these into an original, vulnerable, and courageously self-revealing novel that triggered a bidding war among Swedish publishers. *Half of Malmö* received mixed reviews for its literary qualities, praise for its themes, and inspired a debate that is ongoing (Axfors, 2022; Barr, 2022; Køljing, 2022). The novel is being adapted into a TV series scheduled for 2025 (Ahlberg, 2023).

*Half of Malmö* begins by introducing readers to Amanda's group of female friends.<sup>5</sup> They all have the same experience of having unlimited sexual access, but mostly being involuntarily single. Her sister insists that Amanda "is a ten and that tens date in all leagues" (Romare, 2021, p. 6).<sup>6</sup> The sister's high assessment could be meant as sympathetic encouragement, or she could be falling prey to the 'mate competition overestimation bias,' that is, how men and women tend to overestimate how attractive

<sup>4</sup>For narrative efficacy, Romare reduced this period to 1 year in the novel.

<sup>5</sup>We refer to the author as Romare and her partly autobiographical protagonist as Amanda.

<sup>6</sup>Hereafter, when citing from *Half of Malmö*, we use only page numbers.

members of the same sex are perceived to be (Hill, 2007). Amanda considers her mate value to be 7 on a 10-point scale, an assessment that seems more precise considering how not a single one of her dates finds her attractive enough as a long-term partner to invite her on a second date. Through the narration, Amanda expresses how she is cognizant of her copulation partners having higher mate value. She admits, “The guy in front of me with the flowing golden-brown hair and the big dark-green irises was definitely two or three leagues above mine” (p. 6). At no point, however, does Amanda consider that there is a difference between people’s short- and long-term values. She assigns value to herself and potential partners based on how sexy they appear in the context of a first date. Given her stated goal of finding a long-term partner, Amanda assesses value, selects men, and chooses dating strategies in a dysfunctional manner.

In line with women’s typical short-term strategies, Amanda advertises her “physicality, sexuality, and lack of commitment.” By contrast, women seeking a long-term partner more often “compete in ways that advertise their parenting abilities and fidelity” (Fisher, 2013, p. 24). Through giving a short-term impression, Amanda avoids the stronger competition that women face in long-term markets, as men lower their mate requirements for one-night stands. She thus gets to interact erotically with the men whom she desires the most, hoping that sex will motivate them to meet her again so that, over time, they can realize her long-term value. What happens instead is that her high-value dates, after having had sex with her, move on to the next woman. Research supports that Amanda’s strategy is effective for short-term mating, but works counter to her long-term ambitions (Kennair, Wade, et al., 2022).

### **A Time Contest Before the First Intercourse**

Amanda’s first sex partner in the novel is a management consultant. He is the best-looking man she has seen in a long time, a Jake Gyllenhaal-lookalike with a large, pleasure-inducing penis and a large, central apartment. Having exceptional looks and finances, he fulfills important female preferences for both short- and long-term mating. The consultant and his friend are by far the superior males in the bar. An hour after meeting them, Amanda and her friend are

on their way to have sex. None of the women are later invited for a second date.

Based on how she is portrayed in the book, Amanda does not have sufficient long-term mate value to be considered as a potential girlfriend by long-term-oriented high-value men. She also does not seek out the arenas that promote long-term-oriented dating. Bars and Tinder give her immediate access to the most attractive men, as long as she makes herself sexually available from the onset. Sexual conflict theory posits that a core conflict between the sexes is how much time should pass before the first intercourse (Buss, 2017). Attractive men have more partners and wait less time (Gangestad & Thornhill, 1997; Thornhill & Gangestad, 1994). By agreeing to have sex with the consultant after 1 hr, Amanda signals that she does not require a high investment, which is what short-term-oriented men prefer (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Haselton & Buss, 2001).

Amanda’s maladaptive strategies are informed by how hominin females evolved highly selective preferences for short-term mating to ensure that, in case of pregnancy, the offspring would at least have good genes (Buss, 2016; Buss & Schmitt, 1993). A trope in evolutionary research used to be that women were coy and uninterested in promiscuity (Scelza, 2013). We now have a more complex understanding (Fisher & Bourgeois, 2020; Fisher et al., 2013). Bendixen et al. (2019) found that the very sexiest men arouse in women an equally strong sense of attraction as sexy women arouse in men. In such instances, at least in gender-equal and sexually liberal Scandinavia, women signal their attraction even more strongly than men, suggesting that when women finally encounter a man who is able to arouse them, they are driven to seize the opportunity. However, when women encounter average men, they are less attracted than men are to average women.

These mechanisms trigger emotions that motivate Amanda to adopt short-term strategies that go against her pair-bonding ambitions. She has conflicting desires that the modern Scandinavian environment makes more challenging to navigate. In these countries, dating typically involves early sex. In order to be motivated for copulation on the first date, Amanda feels that she has no choice but to pursue only the men who immediately trigger her lust. If she had considered more carefully which qualities would be more important to her in a long-term partner, she may have adjusted the



value she assigns to different traits, as Josefin had done in *Sigurd*. Amanda and her friends' choice of mating arenas, their signaling of short-term intentions, and selection of men with far superior short-term mate value all but ensure that copulation does not progress to pair bonding. Men prefer similar-value and less sexually available women when seeking a long-term partner (Bendixen et al., 2019).

In light of her pair-bonding ambitions, Amanda's 'bait-and-switch strategy' is misguided. The "affective shift hypothesis" describes how promiscuously successful, short-term-oriented men tend to detach emotionally following first-time intercourse. While the woman often experiences positive affect meant to facilitate a long-term relationship, men who have had many partners often find women less sexually and physically attractive after sex. This is not the case for men who have had few sex partners (Haselton & Buss, 2001). A better strategy would be to find men willing to spend pre-coital time with her. If such a candidate and Amanda had sufficient time to see if their personalities matched, if they had shared interests, and matching intelligence and other traits, then pair bonding would be a more likely outcome.

After a long period of intense feelings of regret, Amanda comes to suspect that early sex is not the best way to sell herself as a long-term partner. When she experiments with holding back sex, she finds herself unable to compete for the most attractive men, who become less interested in giving her attention. Amanda bemoans, "Do I have to agree to immediate sex to be allowed to have sex?!" (p. 85). Again, her conflicting desires—for higher-value men and a relationship—lead to confusion, a predicament informed by her evolved psychology. Women's short- and long-term mating criteria are relatively similar, so women often treat casual sex as a springboard for long-term relationships. The fact that modern mating arenas channel so much sexual opportunity to the most attractive men makes casual sex a less-suited entry point for relationships. Kennair, Wade, et al. (2022) found that people are aware of this, and perhaps Amanda is too, at some level, but she remains unable sufficiently to separate "to have sex" from a productive pursuit of a pair bond, for which people recommend having fun together, engaging in deep conversations, and spending significant time with each other.

Despite feeling increasingly painful regret, Amanda does not change her strategies, seek out

more long-term-oriented mating markets, or pursue men more likely to have long-term intentions. She seems neither to understand the intricacies of her mating psychology nor be able to read the intentions of those men with whom she has sex. In line with the findings of Kennair et al. (2021), Amanda's feelings of intense regret trigger no adaptive shift in behavior.

### Is Dating Mastery Only for Douches?

Amanda continues to do what feels best in the moment. Proceptively, she approaches whom she finds to be the most attractive man in the bar, or swipes right on the small proportion of Tinder men who give the impression of fulfilling her short-term mate preferences. She thinks about lowering her standards, but the affective rewards that the most compelling men offer when they charm her on first dates, habituate Amanda to high-arousal encounters. A few of her sex partners agree to additional dates, but only after she has taken the initiative. Romare offers a convincing portrayal of how having abundant access to sexy men shapes female expectations. One date was

too good looking ... had a really big dick, and was crazy fit. So tight muscles that you almost could not feel anything soft when you touched your fingers against his skin. I have only met one such man before, whose skin felt like cement. (pp. 48–49)

Before they have sex, Amanda cannot help but ask if he is "a player," similar to how Josefin asked Sigurd if he was "an asshole." The date smoothly brushes aside her accusation. Amanda suspects what awaits postcoitus, but gives in to desire. The experienced high-value man is able to provide her with gratifying sex, but has no interest in spending the full night with her; he detaches emotionally. Amanda has grown accustomed to being told to leave once the copulation is over. She reflects on how dysfunctional this is but lays the blame on men for being exploitative.

Amanda continues her search for a highly arousing boyfriend. On a date with a 6'3" professional dancer, she describes him as shockingly handsome, a god-like man with great hair, hands, and teeth. He also has the social skills to give Amanda her best ever Tinder date. Not all of her sex partners are stunning Adonises. At times, her selection of men is done with a greater focus on traits that have long-term value, but since bars and Tinder offer her top-shelf access,

she cannot bring herself to select less compelling men. She dates professional athletes, celebrity musicians, medical doctors, and other high-status individuals. In an interview, Romare said that “after every time I was dumped, I lowered my demands more and more until there was nothing left” (Kuhlin, 2021). This may have been the author’s impression as she kept accumulating rejections, but the narrative of her self-revelatory novel suggests otherwise. Based on how she describes her selection process and the characteristics of her dates later in the book, she may have lowered her standards some, but at least the fictional Amanda seems mostly to have continued dating higher-value men.

In terms of first dates, most of these men are superior choices. Having the talents that allow them to succeed with short-term mating and the dating experience that comes with it, result in the top percentiles of men being able to cater to women’s short-term preferences in a manner that average men typically cannot. Theoretically, women could benefit from their sex’s short-term market power by sexually consuming the most attractive men for as long as the women pleased, then changing orientation and strategies to attract a similar-value partner with traits and attitudes that lend themselves to long-term mating. For some women, such a transition seems challenging. Having grown accustomed to short-term mating with the most attractive men can have adverse consequences for a woman’s ability to forge successful pair bonds. If the practice of serially dating higher-value men leads women to overestimate their mate value, they are likely to increase their mate standards across a variety of indicators, making it hard to find someone who is both compelling enough and willing to bond with them (Buss & Shackelford, 2008). Amanda arrives at the realization that it is the modern dating format itself that has made her so discriminatory:

Is it so that when you feel that a date is too good to be true, it is actually too good to be true? That only *douches* can be so intimate and loving the first time you meet, and that it therefore never ends well? (p. 236)

By “douches,” she seems to refer to short-term oriented, attractive men who are high in Dark Triad traits (Carter et al., 2014; Jonason & Buss, 2012). Such men are often drawn to sexual conquering, capable of making a strong first impression, and able to get their way at the expense of others. Realizing that such men

are the only ones capable of eliciting her arousal and infatuation—at least on first dates—Amanda feels like she wants to die. This is an emotional low point of the book, the scene in which she understands that her psychology is to blame—not primarily the men whom she has allowed to fulfill their mate preferences. Her emotions—against which she feels powerless—draw her to men with whom exploitation is a likelier outcome than pair bonding. More average men with a long-term orientation generally do not have those traits and skills that arouse in her an immediate desire to mate. In bars, they do not show up on her radar. On Tinder, she swipes them away. As Buss (2021) wrote, female choosiness seems to make most men “invisible as viable options in women’s mating minds.”

In the context of a first date out on town, it is hard for men with high long-term mate value to showcase qualities such as their partner and parenting skills, their willingness to commit and invest in the pair bond, their strong social standing, and their ability to plan and provide. Although both sexes prefer a high level of agreeableness in long-term partners, Dark Triad traits seem more effective for making a strong first impression. If Amanda had prioritized spending time with similar-value men, she may have experienced emerging feelings of love, a slower-burning emotion that motivates women to have sex also with lower-value men.

In previous eras, Amanda would have had access to a much smaller number of potential mates. The courtship likely would have lasted months or years. She would have gotten to know her courter more deeply, and he would have gotten to know her as well. Tinder encourages her to evaluate a never-ending line of men, using seconds or minutes on each. Research shows that when women have many choices, they tend to eliminate candidates by a single attribute at a time. Visual cues become more important. For Amanda, her selecting attribute is mostly hotness, which is central when your dating strategy includes sex on the first night. When women have fewer options, they focus less on visual aspects and evaluate potential partners more holistically. Having faced a smaller pool of potential mates also leaves people more satisfied with their decision (Goetz et al., 2019).

Amanda feels debilitated by choice. Romare portrays that she falls prey to her evolved mate preferences, but as a consequence of the 21st-century

environment. In interviews, Romare (2022b) has suggested that one solution could be to return to 20th-century mating practices. She finds today's mating morality and technologies to make it too hard for women to fulfill their desire for a relationship. One factor is how there is nearly no cultural pressure on Amanda to change her strategies. Her promiscuity is not discouraged through shaming, a practice that is relatively rare in today's gender-equal Scandinavia (Kennair, Thomas, et al., 2023). Instead, she had felt ashamed prior to beginning her serial dating for only having had seven sex partners. Wanting to increase her number of partners at the same as she seeks a boyfriend appears to be the prime example of conflicting desires that generate the habits that Amanda later is unable to move past.

*Half of Malmö* places the blame on present-day culture, not female agency. This thematic argument evokes that of Louise Perry in *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution* (2022). Women were promised emancipation through sexual liberation, but post-1968 mating morality has primarily benefitted the small number of men with high short-term mate value. Eva Illouz made a similar case in *The End of Love: A Sociology of Negative Relations* (2019). Confluent love has reduced people to consumer goods, she posits, transforming sex into an economic unit to be distributed on markets. These iniquitous mating markets seem increasingly to be moving underground. Premodern mating efforts tended to occur in communal arenas. In *The New Laws of Love: Online Dating and the Privatization of Intimacy*, sociologist Bergström (2022) wrote that many women have begun to hide their mating, even from friends. Her interviewees often would not date men from their social circle, or introduce dates to friends. Apps make it easier for women to have casual sex without being judged; by keeping sex partners secret, they avoid expectations of chastity. The narrative in *Half of Malmö* suggests that women also could be motivated to hide dates so that their social group remains unaware of postcoital rejections, which could be used to ascribe lower mate value to the rejected woman.

Bergström, Illouz, and Perry conclude that contemporary sex norms align poorly with female psychology and societal demands. Earlier moralities channeled sexual lust into social behaviors that mostly ended in marriage and reproduction. In the latter half of *Half of Malmö*, Amanda tries to

adopt such behavior. Her challenge is to master how not to do what provides her with the greatest short-term affective rewards, but what can get her pair-bonded. Her turning point comes after she, for the first time, is able to sympathize with incels.

### Obligatory Drowning in Love's Shit Barrel

Amanda's struggles with modern singledom place her in the tradition of protagonists such as Bridget Jones, the women in *Sex and the City*, and others. Her unique challenges relate to technology and her Swedish environment. In earlier times, parental meddling, expectations of chastity, and the fear of unwanted pregnancies typically contributed to the main conflicts of these female-centered mating narratives. In the 2020s, women like Amanda are free to sleep with as many men as they please. They can give in to their evolved short-term desires, but for many, such behavior can conflict with their stronger desire for a pair bond. Amanda's antagonists—high-value men and dating apps—both exploit her evolved mate preferences to achieve their goals for short-term mating and profits, respectively.

As Amanda must transform her interiority in order to earn a boyfriend, Tinder is assigned the role of her symbolic antagonist. She had tried the app 2 years prior to her serial dating project but deleted it after having had disappointing sex on her first date—a not uncommon experience for women (Kennair et al., 2016). When she again downloads it, she refers to Tinder as “love's shit barrel” (p. 87). She feels that she has no choice if she is to find a mate. For someone seeking long-term commitment, this more short-term-oriented app is not a great choice, but its cultural position and addiction-inducing algorithms have made it the world's premier dating app. Its economics incentivize the app's owners to keep users single and paying high monthly fees; in late 2023, Tinder introduced a new premium membership for \$6,000 a year.

Amanda gets dopamine rushes from swiping and matching that keep her going. Facing nothing but postcoital rejection exhausts her, but she feels unable to change her attitude and strategies. “I have become addicted to this dating,” she admits, “Do you know how condescending I was toward others who were like me just ten months ago?” (p. 222). Midway through the book, she decides to delete Tinder and stop

dating. She has no alternative strategy, but wants the pain to stop—she just has one more man to meet, and after him, another, and so forth. She feels that her serial dating has changed her psychological makeup. Two weeks before her decision to quit, Amanda was surprised to feel similar to involuntarily celibate men:

I have never understood the incel movement. Seriously, they are so fucked up in the head. Today, though, I got this thought when a few cuties passed me in the city. Crap. Why isn't anyone fucking me? I'm walking here in the city, with a fully loaded vagina, and no one takes the chance. That's not fair. It's your fucking duty to satisfy me. Somewhere around there I understood the similarity. (pp. 145–146)

Dead tired of her Groundhog Day of first dates, she wants to tell men on Tinder, “Ok, just come here and we’ll be in love, ok?” (p. 214). Sexual conflict theory suggests that she has been too cooperative with her dates, not sufficiently viewing first encounters as an arena for intersexual competition. Amanda feels that she cannot handle any more exciting plans that never come to fruition. Before sex, men talk about what they will do together, about their mom whom Amanda will meet, and the adventures on which they will embark. When men talk of integrating their date into their social circle, this can be an effective strategy for giving a long-term impression, but short-term-oriented men typically avoid delivering on such promises (Jonason & Buss, 2012).

Women having evolved to be the sexual selectors incentivizes men to be deceptive. For instance, 71% of men admit to having exaggerated how they feel in order to get laid (Buss, 2017). A ruthless example is how Amanda’s friend was told by her date that he “had never meet anyone as wonderful as you” (p. 121). After sex, he gave her half an hour to leave—and never replied to her texts. Amanda repeatedly suffers similar postcoital behaviors but never understands or adapts to the short-term strategies of the highly experienced men she dates. The increasing pain she feels could be interpreted as her organism telling her that she is losing the intra-female competition for resources that are vital for the long-term success of potential offspring (Hrdy, 1999; Liesen, 2013). Amanda clearly is no 10 in the eyes of high-value men, as none of them is willing to invest in her, only to have sex. Feeling trapped in this self-constructed loop of exploitation and addiction, she sees no solutions. She believes Tinder is ruining her life, but it is also her most cherished comfort, one that seems

no more concerned with her well-being than what the men she dates are. Tinder sends her peak alerts, informing her that she can get 10 times as many exposures to potential mates—if she logs in now. She gives in:

When I returned to the app—*fucking hell how wonderful*. It was an incredible feeling to be welcomed back into the comfortable environment and swipe from guy to guy ... Never has an app made such a nice feeling flow through me. (p. 238)

Her addiction is so strong that:

if I am to be honest, I check the app about once a minute. Every time I put down the mobile, I pick it up again. I swiped through all of Malmö that night, and I am now going through guys in Copenhagen (in spite of me not liking Danes!). (p. 239)

The expression “all of Malmö” reveals the limitations of her outlook. The large number of Malmö men who could be willing to pair bond with her are less likely to operate on Tinder, an app that primarily distributes casual sex to men with the highest short-term value. The type of men who used to succeed in attracting women in bars—and who still do—seems to be the same men who flourish on apps (Botnen et al, 2018; Grøntvedt et al., 2020). This pattern is ancient; *Homo* communities may always have had a small proportion of promiscuous maters (Gavrilets, 2012).

Goetz et al. (2019) believe that this proportion is increasing as a result of large urban markets, social anonymity, and a culture of sexual openness. The modern environment seems to trigger short-term ambitions even in lower-value men—as they witness the mating success of the most attractive men—which was the case with Sigurd. Yong et al. (2023) found that not only insings but also lower-value men are adopting unrealistic standards that prevent pair bonding. Mating opportunities may be increasingly channeled to the most attractive men, but also other men respond to our present era’s promiscuity with a choosiness that makes it even harder for them to find a mate. Women may never have had greater access to short-term mating, but such practices bring fewer advantages than they did in our ancestral environment when women to a greater extent could depend on short-term mates to contribute certain resources (Goetz et al., 2019). The result of these developments seems to be lose–lose mating dynamics for large groups of both men and women.

## Two Final Challenges

Amanda's possible salvation comes in the form of Emil, a man whose looks make him appear to be a player, but whose insecurities seem to have contributed to him adopting a long-term orientation. Confident men can also be long-term oriented, but Romare portrays Emil in a way that suggests that his shy nervousness has hindered him from engaging in the mating behavior to which most characters in her book seem drawn. He expresses a strong interest in pair bonding with Amanda, but she is not sure whether she is capable of settling for someone who only has the exterior to which she has grown accustomed, but not the confident personality.

Their courtship illustrates the struggles insings can experience when transitioning away from serial dating the most attractive men. Wary of falling prey to more short-term deception, Amanda demands to know when Emil last had sex, which was 3 years ago with his ex. He is a nerdy gamer who immediately falls in love and swears to pair bond for as long as she will let him. The morning after their first copulation, he whispers, "I can't believe that it is possible to be this close to another person" (p. 271). He is precisely what she has told herself that she wants:

*Amanda, I said quietly to myself, all you've whined about all year is that you haven't found a kind and nice and good guy, who likes you, and now there's one in the bed, take the chance! Never mind his weird comments, you know that he says those things because he is insecure. (p. 290)*

It is unclear whether Emil is debilitatingly insecure, or just lacks the social bravado that characterizes many promiscuous men. Amanda and her friends are so accustomed to the winners in short-term markets that they interpret other men to be anomalies. As Amanda tries to get used to Emil's low-key personality, her friend suffers a date with someone in "the worst Tinder category" (p. 272), meaning that he is shy and quiet. Incapable of giving a sexy impression from the onset, such men struggle to get the opportunity to display any potential long-term qualities.

Romare elaborates on how the demands of the modern dating format incentivize women to disregard men who are unable to trigger immediate arousal. Amanda has second thoughts after Emil declines her offer of having sex in a public park. In bed, when he awkwardly tries to shoot his

sperm in her face, she concludes that he commits "the gravest 'cum-in-face' fail ever" (p. 296). He cannot give her the sexual and social peak experiences that promiscuously successful men could provide already on the first date. Instead, he offers postcoital cuddling, long-term commitment, and monogamy.

Amanda fears that she has grown addicted to "bad-boy energy," or that she is "incapable of taking care of love once she has found it," or that she and Emil are only together "because no one else wants them" (p. 293). Eventually, she decides to take the leap, symbolically by deleting Tinder. She refers to this as "going sober." She does not delete the account, however, "in case I will want to download it again. I am not that confident that this will turn out well" (p. 287).

Although Amanda has spoken and narrated as if she has been exclusively long-term-oriented, she also has been driven by short-term preferences. In order to overcome her conflicting desires, that is, truly to commit to a long-term orientation, she must overcome two final challenges. After more than a decade of being single, her identity and loyalties are tied to this group. She feels envious of two young women who talk about the men with whom they are about to have sex. Amanda bemoans, "That is a joy you only get from being single" (p. 309), but reminds herself of the happiness you only get from being in love.

We could view this as a shift in attitude which also is motivated by her entering into a new life phase. Especially among people in their early 20s, a short-term orientation is common. For various reasons that the novel does not dwell on, Amanda had partied little and rarely had sex in her 20s. She presents her dating project as a search for a boyfriend but also seems driven to catch up with what she had missed out on with regard to short-term mating. Another motivating factor could be reproductive expediting, an increasing willingness to engage in sexual intercourse due to declining fertility (Easton et al., 2010).

The trauma Amanda suffers primarily stems from her not understanding the difference between male and female mating psychology and the power differentials in short- and long-term markets. With so many dynamics of our era's mating regime being new, there exist few cultural scripts that convey to people how best to strategize their mating. Amanda's struggles are typical of how many women are left feeling vulnerable and confused (Heia, 2023; Leigland, 2021; Sillesen, 2023). By



the time she meets Emil, Amanda is more than ready to move on, although she struggles to let go of her new habits and trait-based behavior.

The second challenge comes in the form of a text from the consultant she had sex with early in the novel. Finally, the Jake Gyllenhaal-lookalike invites her to a follow-up date. The novel ends as Amanda ponders,

*a rich management consultant with a large apartment centrally in Malmö, or a poor student living in a student apartment in Kristianstad? No, cried a voice in my head. I am in love god dammit, cried the heart. I know, I answered back. What is wrong with me? Have I sunk so low during this year of dating that I cannot do without it. No, no, no. It can't be like that. Let this turn out well. (p. 310)*

### Female Mating Mismatch

While *Sigurd* attests to the challenging work that lies ahead for an incel committed to becoming pair-bonded, *Half of Malmö* gives the impression that Amanda could have reduced her suffering, and perhaps more quickly reached her mating goal, had only she understood why she had such easy access to sex while difficult access to pair bonding. Women have the power in short-term markets, but because a large majority of women direct their attention to a small minority of men, mostly the most attractive men benefit from women's short-term market advantage. If casual sex had greater value to more women, having access to practically unlimited copulation with higher-value men could have been an astounding advantage; we can hardly imagine how men would respond if afforded the same privilege. Instead, women using their market power to maximize their short-term mate preferences, that is, to mate with the most immediately attractive men, ends up preventing many of these women from fulfilling what is the ultimate mating goal of most people: to become pair-bonded.

Apostolou (2017) suggested that men are not the only ones who may be suboptimally evolved for our modern regime of individual choice. When parents selected spouses, our female ancestors faced weak pressures in terms of being able to attract a long-term mate. Many women are likely to have traits that would not have affected their mating prospects in the past, but which in the modern environment contribute to singledom. Since women's mate choice was more strictly controlled, they are likely to suffer a greater mismatch. An underdeveloped ability

to assess their mate value, and the quality and intentions of potential mates, could be female shortcomings that contribute to present-day dysfunction. Moreover, parents had a long time to assess courtiers, and a community to help them do so. The modern dating format grants women often no more than an inebriated evening.

Amanda's fixation on sexiness could also be informed by genetic conflict theory. When a family selects a mate for their daughter, they typically emphasize investment traits, that is, traits and resources that the man has that can also benefit his wife's extended family. Since good gene traits benefit the daughter and her children more than her parents, she is driven to upvalue looks. Being choosier increases the time it takes to find a mate, and the risk of failing to attract a mate, thus reducing women's reproductive period. Parents who are willing to contribute resources allow their daughters to afford greater choosiness in terms of sexy genes (Biegler & Kennair, 2016). Scandinavian welfare societies seem to contribute similarly to a female choosiness that has adverse effects on reproduction. Generous public support is meant to lead to higher fertility but can have the opposite effect through raising women's standards for a long-term mate. Much of the West's modern environment seems to have made biparental care so optional that many women, like Amanda, are driven to overly focus on good genetic quality (Apostolou, 2017).

With the negative consequences such a strategy has for pair bonding and reproduction, giving maladaptive preference to sexiness could also be viewed as a result of mismatch. Kennair and Biegler (2017) hypothesize that contemporary women's mating strategies could be a result of traits that evolved to counter the power that parents wielded over their daughters' mate choice. Under previous regimes of parental choice, our ancestors generally were not the prettiest men. Males who worked hard, built networks and alliances, and could lead a family were preferred for reproduction. Short-term-oriented Adonises risked being killed by the kin of their latest illicit affair. Women may have evolved an exaggerated preference for such men to counter parental pragmatism. Under today's regime of individual choice, women are free to act on those desires that may have evolved as a result of eons of parental restrictions.

### Intersexual Understanding and Sympathy

Apostolou encourages more empirical research on mating mismatch. After the foundational work of Symons (1979), this element of mating has only intermittently been engaged by evolutionary scholars (e.g., Apostolou, 2017; Goetz et al., 2019; Kennair & Biegler, 2017). Considering the stakes of our present era's mating dysfunction, developing a better understanding of mismatch has become imperative. Men and women are at an alarming rate opting out of dating: 57% of single Americans report not being interested in short- or long-term mating (Gelles-Watnick, 2023). Over the past two decades, past-year sexual inactivity among young men rose from 19% to 31% (Ueda et al., 2020). Another survey indicated that from 2008 to 2018, virginity among men under age 30 rose from around 8% to 27% (Ingraham, 2019). American women long had sex at previous levels (Ueda et al., 2020), but a recent survey found that their past-year sexual inactivity had risen to 32% (BRC, 2023).

These are worrying numbers. The increasing competition, exploitation, and hopelessness that mark modern mating markets give many people an aversion against participating. *Sigurd* and *Half of Malmö* offer insights into the individual and social mechanisms that drive this frustration. For individuals, singledom can have a line of negative consequences (Argyle, 1999; Diener et al., 2000; Grover & Helliwell, 2019). Especially involuntary singledom is associated with loneliness, sadness, and low life satisfaction (Apostolou et al., 2019; Costello et al., 2022). For societies, having fewer couples contributes to lower fertility rates, which some fear will age our populations so much that social orders will disintegrate (Bainbridge, 2009; Eberstadt, 2021). Western and many other countries are steering toward a demographic collapse (Vollset et al., 2020). Musk (2021) is among those who keep warning that "birth rate collapse is the biggest threat to human civilization." This is a complex threat, but increasing rates of singledom seem to contribute to the malaise (Berglöff, 2021; Fry & Parker, 2021).

We believe that a better understanding of sex differences and mating markets could help people adjust their expectations and strategies in a productive manner. Such insights may also help the sexes sympathize more with each other's respective plights. In our introduction section, when Axfors (2022) and Barr (2022) insisted that "men" have

the power in mating markets, they disregarded the lived experience of more than 80% of men. Axfors's reframing of men's low expectations as a privilege that provides more choices and "relational power" is similar to presenting poverty as liberating. When Romare interpreted "guys" to be less interested in second dates (Stokstad, 2021), she did not sufficiently consider the filtration to which she had subjected the male dating pool before she sat across from attractive, short-term-oriented men. The way in which Nossen (2020) and Rustad (2020) rejected the title *Sigurd Can't Get Laid* reflects their blindness to how women's increasing discrimination of the lowest-value men has detrimental effects on many men's quality of life (Costello et al., 2022). A survey found that 82% of incels have considered suicide (Incels.co, 2020).

Similarly, we should sympathize with the struggles of insings. Men should not evaluate the experiences of women from the perspective of male mate preferences. Understandably, average men could find it hard to sympathize when Romare (2022a) accounted for the panic her mother suffered when joining Facebook Dating. In a few hours, the 58-year-old received requests from 400 to 500 men. Every minute, a new man expressed interest. For men who mostly face rejection and silence, such attention could appear utopian. The fact that Romare was unable to stop dating attractive men who only wanted sex, without her understanding why, could be made fun of, which some have done. A Norwegian influencer expressed similar views with regard to the men she found most compelling on Tinder: "Those I find interesting are not interested in anything serious or want 'something simple' that does not challenge them in any way" (Heia, 2023). She is not the only disgruntled dater who has complained publicly about today's "men," as a consequence of her inability to distinguish between "men" and "short-term-oriented, high-value men." Leigland (2021) deleted Tinder after having had to "kiss many frogs disguised as princes," by which she meant men who have sex with more than one woman. These experiences made her "a worse, sadder, and more cynical person." Hilde Nordlund became tired of "fuckboys in their forties" (Sillesen, 2023). Bille (2023) concluded, after years of postcoital rejections, that men lack depth.

Incels and insings are easy to ridicule and belittle. Our two fictional case studies offer insights

into how painful their experiences can be, and how large a shadow erotic and romantic failures can cast on individual lives. Villainizing men who suffer involuntary celibacy is not a constructive way forward. Neither is diminishing the pain felt by women who remain single because they are unable to resist the temptation of serially dating higher-value men. Both incels and insings fall victim to our evolved mate preferences. Communities that gain a deeper understanding of what these preferences are could experience better intersexual communication, which might aid men and women in finding more functional ways to mate.

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