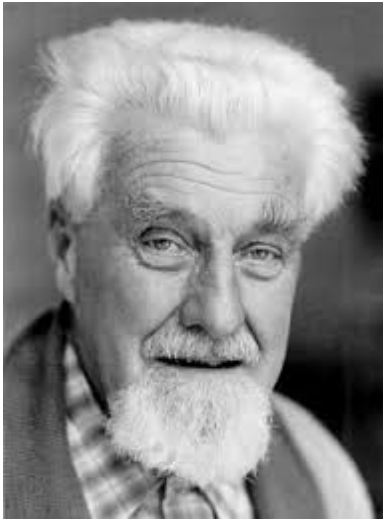


Female Scent-Marking in the Suburbs

by Con Chapman

Several cats can make use of the same hunting ground without coming into conflict by using it according to a timetable, in the same way as housewives use a communal washhouse. An additional safeguard against undesirable encounters is the scent marks which these animals—the cats, not the housewives—deposit wherever they go.

On Aggression, Konrad Lorenz



Lorenz: "Sweetie, I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't spray my favorite chair."

Saturday night, and for once we get to go to *my* favorite restaurant, the one my wife hates. "What is it you don't like about it?" I asked her as we drove up.

"We never get a good table," she said. "It feels crowded."

As we approached the hostess station I could see that there might be a problem. One couple ahead of us, two open tables, one next to the kitchen with fluorescent lights shining through swinging doors, the other a quiet corner booth under subdued lighting. It seems like we just can't get off the schneid at this place.

The hostess told the couple in front of us their table would be ready in just a moment, then greeted us. I gave her our name, she scratched us off her list, then said "I'll seat you right after this couple."

My wife gave me a look that could have microwaved a potato, said "I see somebody I want to say hi to," then scooched past the couple ahead of us with an "Excuse me."

I watched her, puzzled, as she headed to the booth where the bus boy was clearing away the dishes. She removed an atomizer from her purse and squeezed out a few puffs, then retook her place in line. "Ding dong—I was wrong," she said with a smile.



"Right this way," the hostess said to the couple in front of us, and the trio walked over to the booth where the female of the couple hesitated. "Actually, could we have the little table over by the kitchen?" she asked apologetically.

"No problem," said the hostess, leaving the prime spot open for us.

A few moments later when we were seated, I asked her “What'd you just do?”

“I scent-marked the table,” she said. “I can't depend on you to exercise our territorial imperative, so I have to.”



Try the pad thai!

So she had finally adopted the principles of animal behavior that I've used for dinner table anecdotes over the years. “Fine with me,” I said. “It's not like I want to butt antlers with some hedge fund manager over a lousy Saturday night dinner reservation.”

I've been “hip” to animal behavior ever since I took a college class in the subject, and it has stood me in good stead. Whenever I see somebody bare their teeth or flare their nostrils in a business negotiation I take evasive action, retreating to my lair—boring legal boilerplate—where I have a distinct tactical advantage. I've learned to recognize threat postures and dominant-submissive patterns that have enabled me to play three-dimensional chess with my adversaries, while they in their benighted ignorance of animal behavior have been playing checkers.

"Oh yeah? So's your old man!"

For once we ate in peace without her rolling her eyes at my lack of "street smarts," by which she means not my ability to find my way out of neighborhoods she'd never get within a howitzer's range of, but my inability to successfully pull off dinner reservations at a fancy restaurant. Somehow, I don't think that's what the author of the phrase had in mind, but let it pass, we're having a good time.

Afterwards we strolled the streets, doing a little window-shopping, when something caught her eye as we passed Talbots, the upscale clothing chain that 85% of American women think is for customers older than them. "There's that sweater I asked you to get me for Christmas," she says.



Talbots: "Haven't you got something a little more expensive?"

"You gave me three choices, and I got the cheapest," I said, an eminently reasonable defense if you ask me, but it didn't sway her.

"I'm going in to take a look at it," she said, and I dutifully followed, like a sheep following the Judas goat.

"Excuse me," she said to a saleswoman after she'd examined the price tag. "Is this on sale yet?"

"It will be marked down next Saturday," the saleswoman said.

"Can you hold it for me?"

"I'm sorry, we can't do that."

"That's all right, thanks," my wife said, and the saleswoman wandered off to help someone else.

Again, she pulled the atomizer out of her purse and gave the sweater a squirt.

"It works on clothes too?" I asked.

"We'll see," she said as we walked out.



"Put the cable-knit cardigans on the sale table—they're not moving."

We stood discretely out of the line of view as we looked through the plate glass window, like kids watching a mother guppy eat her young in an aquarium. A woman approached the sweater rack but stopped suddenly, as if she sensed a dark force like that which Darth Vader projects in Star Wars movies—and backed off.

"I think it will still be there Saturday," my wife said silyly, and we got in our car to go home.

We exited off the highway and I was just about to turn onto our street when my wife said “Hold it—stop here” in front of the house of friends who, for some reason, we haven't seen much of lately.

She checked the driveway—looked like they were out for dinner, too—then got out of the car and applied several liberal squirts to the rhododendrons and holly trees.



“Okay—I think you've officially gone round the bend now,” I said as she got back in the car. “You're a respectable, upper middle-class woman—not a feral cat. What the hell did she do to deserve that?”

“She came to our Christmas party two years ago—and she didn't compliment me on the decorations.”

