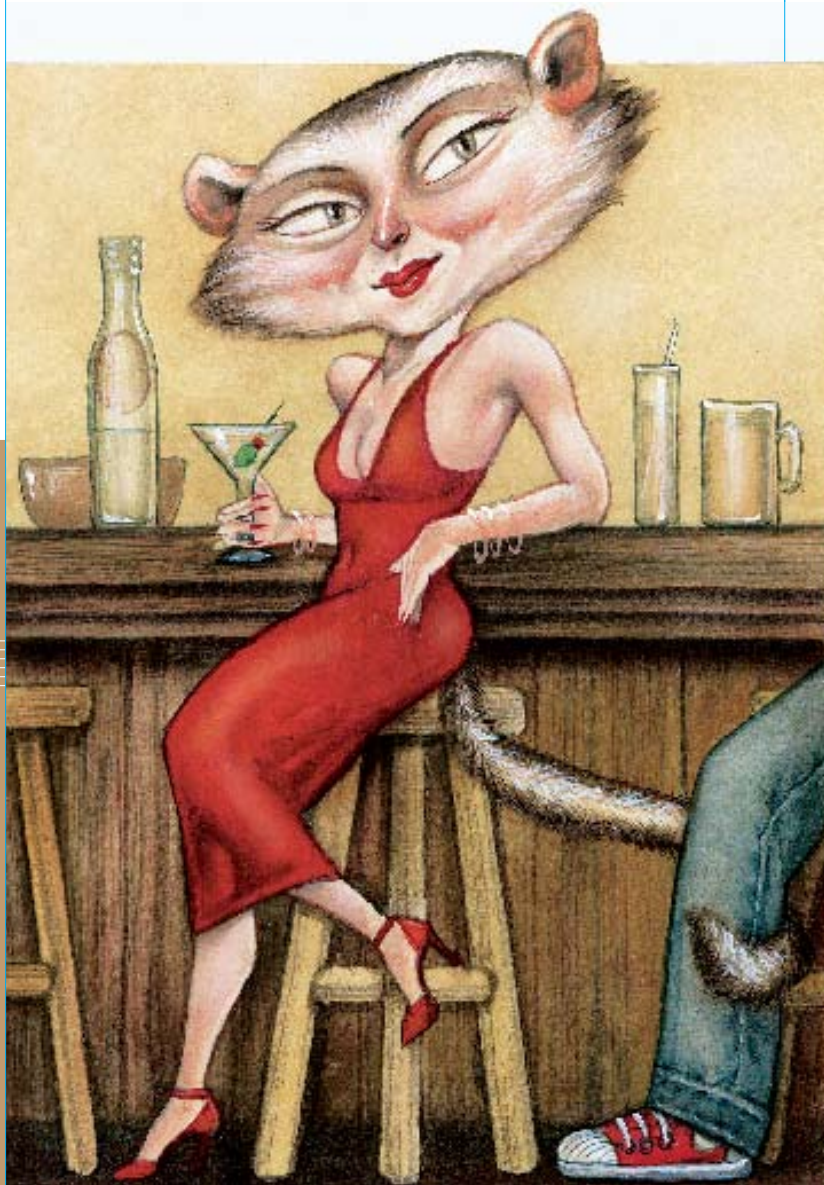


A cougar by any other name...

WHETHER IT'S USED TO INSULT OR EMPOWER, THE "C" WORD GETS OUR ATTENTION



I was a cougar. I mean, I guess I was. I was pushing 40 and he was 27. We dated for a year. He told me he was “getting way more points” for hanging out with an older woman than he would if he were with a younger one. He took me to a lot of weddings and all his friends were really nice, super fun and very gracious. (Although they didn’t get my crack about the lack of fancy parties at the other end of a marriage. But they will. In time.)

Even though I was an older woman stepping out with a younger man, no one ever called me a cougar, at least not to my face. But I was prepared for that particular “c” word: “I prefer the term ‘soccer mom,’” I would reply. I’m proactive: If having a relationship with a younger man meant I had to be put in a category, this soccer mom was going to choose it herself, thank you very much.

I cringe at the word cougar. I’ve always figured it was just the latest label — an age-specific one — used to insult women who have sex, made up by men who fear them, which, frankly, is a lot of men. That’s my theory anyway. I thought cougar meant slut. *Old* slut.

But that’s not what it means to 44-year-old Joanne Billy*, an attractive and successful Calgary lawyer with a husband seven years younger. “I wear it as a badge of honour,” she says. “In my world, cougar means a confident, great looking, smokin’ hot older woman who knows her way around. I’m proud to be a cougar. I think it’s a compliment, because I know I am not a slut.”

Indeed, Billy’s definition of the word has little to do with sex and everything to do with power. “Cougar means I know what I’m doing and I can eat you for breakfast if I want. So you don’t want to piss me off, because I am old enough and smart enough and I have more money than you.”

BY JENNIFER ALLFORD

ANITA KUNZ



Still, Billy — a mother of three — does not want her real name published. She doesn't want her kids to have to deal with any backlash...because while she and her girlfriends call each other cougar playfully and respectfully, Billy understands the word can have a different connotation when used by others.

Valerie Gibson is a professional cougar in her sixties who will happily have her name published because she's selling books coaching older women how to "find and identify the different types of prey, prepare the perfect seduction and pounce back when it ends."

The former newspaper columnist has written a book called *Cougar: A Guide for Older Women Dating Younger Men* and, unlike Billy, Gibson's definition of cougar has everything to do with sex. Loads of it: "She's the new breed of single, older woman — confident, sophisticated, desirable and sexy, she knows exactly what she wants. What she wants is younger men and lots of great sex. What she doesn't want is children, cohabitation or commitment."

You can find even more definitions at urbandictionary.com — an inventory of street slang where users post meanings of words. Most of the descriptions are something along these lines: "An old, ugly woman over the age of 30 who frequents clubs and bars in search of having sex with a young guy," and "An older, plastic looking chick found groping unsuspecting males at the bar. Usually accompanied by her daughter and/or other cougar friends."

Some of the entries acknowledge the benefits of sleeping with a more experienced woman; a few state that a cougar is an attractive older woman. All agree a cougar is a sexual woman (with the exception of one that describes it as a sexy male rugby player from Forfar, Scotland), and most of the 40-odd definitions are derogatory.

No wonder Joanne Billy is cautious about going public. And no wonder Kerrie Penney had such a hard time finding subjects for a documentary about the word, *Cat Call*. The 44-year-old filmmaker found plenty of men who would share their thoughts, and she had a grand chat with Valerie Gibson, but she had a hell of a time finding ordinary women. "We worked on *Cat Call* for over two years and it was a year into it when we found two cougars in Calgary [who agreed to be filmed]. Once women found out they'd have to be on camera, they just vanished."

There are no special terms for single, sexual men. They're just called men. If they take someone home from the bar, they're called lucky.

Penney herself grappled with feeling insulted by the term. "It was the first day of the shoot and a guy who was about 21 called me a cougar," she recalls. "I was shocked and offended because I never thought of myself as an older, overtly sexual woman. I am a fortysomething single mom of a six-year-old. I don't troll bars, I don't date younger men by design."

Neither do the two women who agreed to appear in *Cat Call*. And even they seemed to wear the cougar badge a little reluctantly, like stilettos they knew they'd have trouble walking in. Penney recalls their definition: "If you think you're never going to be a cougar and you feel sorry for us, well, guess what: If you're 40 and you're single, you're a cougar."

Penney's cougars also come up with a term for single men over 40 — "boogers" — and when they do, they collapse into giggles in front of the camera. It's funny because it's ridiculous. There are no special terms for single, sexual men. They're usually just called men. If they take someone home from the bar, they're called lucky.

Unlike men, women have always been plunked into categories, says Aritha van Herk. "I call it the trilogy of women: the mother, the saint and the whore," says the writer and English professor at the University of Calgary. "Where do you put the other women, and what do you do with them?"

You find a term and lump them in it. Van Herk calls cougar a suitcase word. "You can stick them in that suitcase and think you've got them contained and that's all you need to do. There's no complexity attributed to what you put into the suitcase. If that's a woman over 40 without a man, then she must be a cougar," van Herk explains. "Such generalizations make me crazy. We are far too complicated for that."

Kerrie Penney interviewed dozens of men and, for some, cougar clearly means slut (ergo pay dirt). One man's particularly charming definition was: "Someone you'd like to rail...and have her gone before breakfast."

When Penney started exploring the word, she thought she'd find one clear definition, but that's not how it turned out. "We just asked the question and let other people provide their answers. The people watching will have to come up with their own answer," she says.

Once insulted, now Penney is philosophical: "Cougar, hot woman, mother, sister, whatever," she shrugs, conjuring up the schoolyard adage about sticks and stones. "It's just a word. It has no power unless you give it power." **M**

** Name changed by request*