

THE MAN



Then one

WHO DISAPPEARS

The relationship was going wonderfully, the future looked bright. *Then* he stopped calling. The only way to protect yourself from him is to recognize the warning signs. by Maggie Scarf

THE ATTRACTION HAD BEEN INTENSE AND IMMEDIATE. CYNTHIA Hoffman had never known anyone quite like Matt before—he was a Harvard-trained lawyer, an extremely energetic, successful entrepreneur, and yet so endearingly empathetic and confiding that he soon became as much a pal as a lover, someone upon whom she could depend as much as she depended upon her closest female intimates.

True, she had heard that he'd been out with many, many women in the several years since his divorce, and that every one of these liaisons had proved to be a relatively brief and transient one. It was also true that Matt had said something quite odd at the outset of the relationship: "I'm afraid that I'm going to hurt you." But that remark had corresponded to nothing that seemed to be happening between them, and Cynthia could understand it if he seemed somewhat apprehensive and wary.

Matt was, as he'd told her at the outset, still recuperating from a catastrophic eight-year marriage to a woman whom he described as a "critical, verbally abusive monster," and was at the same time struggling to maintain an active, involved relationship with his two young daughters (ages four and six). He was hurting, but he was a *good* man, Cynthia believed. She was, nonetheless, being patient, careful not to crowd him or to make any demands that he might find disturbing.

It had therefore come as a wonderful and quite unexpected surprise when, shortly before Thanksgiving, he'd invited her to join him and his children for the holiday at his country home in Vermont. Cynthia was elated; Matt had never offered to introduce her to his daughters before, and she'd accepted his invitation with delight and enthusiasm. Then, without either warning or explanation, everything ended.

He'd simply *stopped calling*, and would not return the calls when, confused and alarmed, she'd tried getting in touch with him. Was it her fault—some thoughtless thing that she had said or done? It was obvious, as she soon came to realize, that the relationship was over—but *why*, what had happened? Over the past several months Matt had become someone central and important in her life, someone she'd come to care about quite seriously.

But now he'd dropped out—disappeared, plain and

simple. The Thanksgiving vacation approached and then slowly receded, leaving Cynthia in a state of breathless pain, feeling betrayed, used and abandoned.

ARE MEN WHO ABRUPTLY DEPART FROM AN apparently close, ongoing relationship in this brutal fashion—who simply vanish without a word of explanation—*intent upon maximizing the pain and grief* that the deserted partner must inevitably experience? Is the man whom we might call the “serial seducer” (or just plain Don Juan) always engaged in a repetitive scenario that involves entrapping his female partner into a state of emotional dependency and then simply taking off, leaving her twisting slowly, slowly, in the wind? In a word, are men who disappear in this way to be understood as fundamentally *evil* people?

In a recent, quite fascinating presentation entitled “The Structure of Evil,” Christopher Bollas, Ph.D., described the psychology of the serial killer. The goal of the serial killer is, of course, out-and-out murder, but it is tempting to look at Dr. Bollas’ remarks in terms of the serial *seducer*, whose mode of departing from the relationship can be seen as a form of psychic murder—that is, a catastrophic abandonment and betrayal.

“Evil,” as Bollas points out, “involves a very particular kind of seduction.” This seduction is one in which the intended victim is selected because she or he is perceived to be vulnerable and that *vulnerability* can readily be exploited. (“I’m afraid I’m going to hurt you,” Matt had murmured at the very beginning of the relationship; but this was a remark to which Cynthia, who’d been feeling adrift and in search of an attachment, had paid what may be termed selective inattention. It was a warning she hadn’t wanted or permitted herself to hear.)

The “malignant process” of the seduction, as Bollas describes it, gets under way with the seducer on the lookout for some likely prey: “To entrap his victim, he must appear to be *good*, and indeed it is this appearance of good that is most compelling.” The potential victim is, in other words, in a state of some neediness (as was 31-year-old Cynthia, who, though highly successful in her career, was feeling lonely), and the apparently nurturing, empathetic seducer’s attentions seem like the very solution to her most urgent life concerns. His emotional availability and caring demeanor make her think that she is someone special to him and that the relationship will eventually deepen into an enduring, loving commitment.

“The seducer *invokes hope* in the other,” states Bollas, and the other comes to view the relationship as a potential resolution to her life’s dilemmas (in Cynthia’s case, clearly, the need for a stable, satisfying love-attachment). Then, according to Bollas, what he calls “the offer” predictably follows.

In terms of the above example, for instance, Matt had

come into Cynthia’s partnerless existence and offered himself to her as lover, friend, adviser, trusted confidant. That offer had, over time, been totally and trustingly accepted. She had created a space for him at the very center of her life and was now in a state of some dependency—increasingly reliant upon him in terms of the outcome of her own fate, and therefore ever more committed to remaining blind to certain signals that he might *not* be as wonderfully nurturing a person as she’d initially believed him to be.

The intensity of Cynthia’s own powerful need—to perceive her lover as a *good* man, whose intentions toward her were nothing other than beneficent—had, over time, transformed her into the fly who was now fully in the spider’s thrall. But of course Matt’s last and final “offer,” the offer that had marked the cresting point of their relationship, had been the invitation to come home with him, to meet his children and to spend the Thanksgiving holiday with them in Vermont.

The inevitable sequel in this process of “evil seduction,” as Bollas depicts it, is *shocking betrayal*. That is, some startlingly out-of-character act or deed on the part of the seducer that suddenly reveals him in an altogether different, astoundingly destructive light. This stunning act—Matt’s warm, Thanksgiving invitation and

his subsequent abrupt, thoroughly unexplained cutting off of the relationship would certainly qualify—leads to the sudden collapse of the victim’s fondest hopes and dearest, most treasured beliefs and expectations.

The seducer is *not* the loving, caring figure he’d appeared to be; he is exposed, in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde-like fashion, as someone cruel, inexplicably contemptuous and downright hateful. His self-unmasking act is, moreover, experienced as so crushingly damaging by the victim that, in Bollas’ words, “The self that was in need...that became dependent, that believed in a good fate...*this self is killed.*”

HADN’T THERE BEEN ANOTHER EASIER, LESS wounding way for Matt to end the relationship, if that was what he’d wanted to do? Hadn’t there been a kinder, more regretful and respectful mode of bidding his partner good-bye? Or had soul murder—the demolition of the other person’s self-esteem and emotional integrity—been what he’d had in mind throughout? If one judged the serial seducer simply from the point of view of his *behavior*, it would not be hard to make the case that his underlying goals are fundamentally destructive, from the very first moment of the relationship onward.

Nevertheless, according to clinical psychologist Betsy S. Stone, Ph.D., serial seducers—men who revel in the passionate “falling in love” phase of a new relationship, and then suddenly leave off when the attachment appears

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to be stabilizing and deepening—are not actually *evil* human beings whose sole purpose is to inflict unending grief and harm.

"The man who seduces and sequentially abandons women is generally *not* a wicked person," observes Dr. Stone, who has included a number of Don Juans in her own patient clientele. "He's not even a *malicious* person; he's a person who wants *very much* to get into a relationship but is actually incapable of following through."

Indeed, says Stone, who maintains a private practice in Stamford, Connecticut, one might think of the serial seducer as a man who suffers from a form of emotional impotence—he is wonderfully skilled at the so-called foreplay of loving, but ultimately cannot follow through. He cannot "perform the act" in terms of investing himself in an ongoing, loving commitment.

Men who disappear from relationships without a word of explanation are, she suggests, usually panicked, *in flight* from something they yearn for but believe they can never achieve. What they are in flight from (and at the same time pining for) is a certain sense of reliable human connectedness—something that they have never actually experienced. "Serial seducers are people who have often—no, make that *always*—suffered an early, very critical abandonment crisis," Stone explains.

"Perhaps, when the serial seducer was a small child, someone crucial just disappeared—someone who *mattered* was there one day and not the next one. Or the early abandonment may have nothing to do with a *physical* absence, but have taken place on a symbolic and emotional level—constant parental neglect or rejection." But in any case, what he's become convinced of is that there's really not enough about him that would make another person want to *stay* in a relationship with him (at least if he hung around long enough so that other person really *knew* him). The serial seducer's basic fear ("and it's not just fear, it's downright *terror*," according to Stone) is that he's basically too unacceptable and unlovable to keep a real relationship going.

Given that he experiences himself as so fundamentally worthless, he quite naturally becomes suspicious about the underlying motives of anyone who starts behaving as if she cares about him. Believing, as he does, that there is nothing about him that could really make the partner want to stay with him (he is so empty inside), he becomes invaded by notions to the effect that she is only there in order to "use" and to exploit him. Thus, his relationships inevitably take on a subtly paranoid flavor.

"My hunch," says Stone, "is that most of these Don Juans believe they *want to be* and *should be* in a significant relationship. They're also great believers in the utopian dream that if they could only find the *right* woman, everything would fall into place and they'd

feel whole and good, they'd live in bliss happily ever after. What they fail to realize, however, is that they themselves are sorely lacking in the basic skills that one needs in order to make a relationship work—and so they're eternally condemned to go on rolling that stone back up the hill, to go on and on, forever searching." They are looking for that elusive Ms. Right, the perfect soul mate; but what they are searching for endlessly and everywhere is actually something missing inside themselves.

The serial seducer is, therefore, not so much an evil or vicious person as he is a very *damaged human being*—someone who is deeply frightened lest another person draw close enough to fully recognize the sense of utter futility, boredom, cynicism and utter desolation that exists within him.

IF THE DON JUAN'S EXPERIENCE OF HIMSELF IS, AS suggested, so profound a sense of barrenness, what has brought this internal situation into being? The answer to this question is a simple one, and one about which there is little expert disagreement. Very early in our lives, an especially important someone (the "primary attachment figure") *who is devoted and emotionally reliable* must be available to the developing child.

It is within the context of this first, all-important bond with the loving caregiver that the very small child's basic sense of himself as an acceptable, lovable human being comes into being—and such a relationship is absolutely critical to psychological growth. In other words, at the very foundation of all human relatedness is the feeling that "somebody important loves me," and in the absence of this crucial early love-attachment, the developing human feels empty at the core. Often, he (or she, as the case may be) experiences himself as worthless and unlovable, because he comes to the con-

clusion that if nobody loves him it's because he hasn't ever been deserving of anyone's love in the first place.

This feeling of being deep-down unworthy and unacceptable leaves the Don Juan-to-be soured by his own deeply pessimistic, bleak and cynical appraisals of himself and other people. Instead of developing the capacity to connect (which we learn from our first loves, our parent/nurturers), he has an awful hole, a vacancy at the very center of his being. And indeed, the devastating sense of betrayal that the seducer's abandoned lover experiences is something that she feels *only temporarily*, while that sense of inner abandonment—of being totally and terrifyingly alone in the universe—is the Don Juan's entire waking experience.

Says Jesse D. Geller, Ph.D., associate clinical professor of psychology in psychiatry and director of the Psychological Services Clinic at Yale University, "One must feel a certain amount of (continued on page 180)

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disappears

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sympathy for this kind of person's pathetic efforts at loving. He flings himself into one relationship after another, but every single one of these relationships (no matter how long or how short) predictably ends in the same sudden, catastrophic cutoff."

The problem for the deserted partner is, adds the psychologist, that this way of leaving—the disturbing suddenness and ambiguity of it—often leads the woman to focus upon her own flaws. "She may see it in terms of how awful she herself is, what terrible thing she must have done to offend him, how unlovable and unattractive she must really be, when what she ought to recognize is that anyone who would behave in this way is a very damaged person."

Emotionally disabled men of this sort are, due to very early trauma, utterly incapable of empathizing with the feelings of other people because they are so lamentably unable to empathize with themselves. "What the woman in this situation *should* be saying to herself," says Dr. Geller, "is 'Thank God this guy is out of my life,' because if he had stayed around, any man who could do this kind of thing would have had her entangled in the world's most terrible relationship."

IN SOME REAL SENSE, THE SERIAL seducer is in terrible pain, the pain of experiencing oneself as a deeply unlovable human being. He has a deep, hollow crater within himself, and very frequently, the woman who gets involved with him is someone who believes that she can meet his needs in such a way that he will eventually be filled up, healed and mended. What she *doesn't* realize is that for him, she (like any other partner) exists only insofar as she fulfills his own needs and functions. The Don Juan kind of character is in fact someone who has never achieved that stage of psychological development in which one becomes capable of recognizing another person as truly separate from oneself and one's own needs. He lacks the capacity to see the partner independently of what he *wants* from her; that is, as a whole, separate, different, living and breathing human being.

Thus, the seducer's apparently cruel and sadistic way of saying goodbye (sudden desertion) is not *at all* heartless in his own mind. Says

Hannah Fox, director of the Metropolitan Center for Object Relations Theory and Practice and a clinician in private practice in New York City and Teaneck, New Jersey, "As the Don Juan sees it, there's not really anyone out there to say goodbye *to*, because he lacks the concept of a self in the first place." According to Fox, the serial seducer is far too primitive to experience so sophisticated an emotion as empathy; and for this reason, the woman of the moment (or any other of the former partners) has no real existence *as a whole person* in his thinking.

So, the question then remains: Is the man who seduces and abandons in this fashion to be thought of as someone malicious and sadistic, or simply psychologically impaired? Is he *evil* or is he just someone who simply hasn't the capacity to comprehend the real emotional harm that he is inflicting? Personally speaking, I find this a difficult question to answer.

What *is* clear to me, though, is that when someone steps on my toe (however unintentionally) *it hurts me*. And while I may understand that the person has *not* landed on my toe because he meant to (he's simply clumsy and poorly coordinated), it's vital for me to realize—especially if he's done it more than once or twice—that he's very liable to do so again. And, while I may sympathize with his failings and genuinely like many things about him, it's urgent for me to think of my own safety and integrity and to create some necessary distance between us.

Similarly, while any woman may feel true pity for the serial seducer and understand his real terror—the terror of coming close to another person, when one experiences oneself as utterly unacceptable in the human world—it is nevertheless *imperative* that she pay attention to the clues, recognize what is actually happening in the relationship, and make sure she is looking out for her own interests. For the Don Juan *always gives signals*.

The signals may not be quite so blatant as Matt's "I'm afraid I'm going to hurt you" (of course, he *knew* he was going to hurt her, or the whole question of hurting her wouldn't have been on his mind). The signals may indeed be very small things—periodically failing to show up for an appointment without giving advance warning; promising to call and then forgetting; bragging about the hordes

of other women who are pursuing him—but these small things do begin to engender alarm and to undermine her trust in him.

At this point, the victim's greatest danger is from herself, and from her own understandable desires and tendencies to suppress and deny what is actually going on. For often she is so desperately committed to making the relationship work that her own good common sense, her very ability to *think*, has departed. What she most needs to do, at this juncture, is to attend to the clues, recognize them for what they are and *then take them very seriously*. For while the serial seducer may not be intentionally evil, to him the woman is basically faceless—once the "high" of the initial idealization is over, he will do to her what he has done to every partner before. In brief, the most important thing to remember, in terms of one's *own* basic security and emotional integrity, is that a good woman's love is actually not going to heal this person, and for heaven's sake (and for your own sake) *stay away from him*. □

beautydetails

New ways to lighten up Page 52 While a good colorist can create most of the looks described, some of the more unique methods are done at the following salons: *Barreling* is the specialty of Doyle/Wilson Salon, Beverly Hills; *slicing* is Beth Minardi's (of Minardi Minardi Salon, NYC) preferred technique; and *three-dimensional color* is done by Michael Brimhall of Gil Gamlieli Beauty Group, NYC.

Editors' choice Page 52 Here's where to find these must-have items: *Carnival Jump-Up Island Cologne* by *Le Parfumeur de Saint Martin*, call The Guavaberry Shop at 011-5995-22965 or send a fax to 011-5995-24497.

For an Avon representative in your area, call 800-FOR-AVON.

Put purple to the lip test Page 56 These are a few more grape-tinted shades you'll want to eat up: Yves Saint Laurent's Rouge Pur Lipstick in True Violet; Givenchy's Lipstick in Lilac #19; Make Up For Ever's Lipstick in N34 (available at Barneys New York and Beverly Hills and Saks Fifth Avenue in Las Vegas and New Jersey, or call 800-757-5157); Mary Kay's Lasting Color Lipstick in Grape; L'Oréal's Colour Suprême Long Wearing Lipcolour in Garnette and Chanel's Lipstick in Cranberry.

Sheer foundations Page 152 Here's how to purchase the following products: *BeneFit's BeneMatte Soufflé*, call 800-781-2336; *Trish McEvoy's Natural Tint Foundation*, available at Henri Bendel, NYC, and select Nordstrom, Neiman Marcus, Jacobson's and Parisian stores; *Shu Uemura's UV Powder Foundation*, call 800-743-8205.