

October 31, 2004

MODERN LOVE; No? No? No? Let Me Read Between the Lines

By STEVE FRIEDMAN; Contributing editors for this column are Cathi Hanauer, editor of the anthology "The Bitch in the House: 26 Women Tell the Truth About Sex, Solitude, Work, Motherhood and Marriage," and Daniel Jones, her husband, who edited "The Bastard on the Couch: 27 Men Try Really Hard to Explain Their Feelings About Love, Loss, Fatherhood and Freedom."

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SHE dumped me. What's important are not the details but the pronoun placement, she preceding me. But there is no villain here. My therapist suggests I repeat this mantra to myself. So I do. There is no villain here.

There is no green-eyed, wasp-waisted, pillow-breasted, sneering-queen-of-the-damned villain who dumped me so swiftly and with such imperious, frigid beauty that I experienced chest pains and shortness of breath, leading to something called a Cardiolyte stress test, which I just discovered my insurance company may not pay for and which has left me not only miserable and lonely and occasionally sobbing in public bathrooms but also about \$6,000 in debt. But no one is to blame here. My therapist suggests I repeat this phrase, too. No one is to blame here.

Did she have her reasons? Could I have been a better boyfriend? Is it telling that I was 48 when we met and never married, that I had spent the better part of three decades shedding wedding-happy sweethearts as a tailback dances away from fiendish linebackers, and that I had recently looked in the mirror and seen, staring back, male-pattern baldness and the egregious folly of my broken-field-running brand of romance? No good can come from dwelling on such questions.

So let's assume she had her reasons. What's important is not what she did or why. What's important is how I handled it. Personal setbacks and romantic rejection, according to authorities ranging from the Dalai Lama to the editors of CosmoGirl, offer us all opportunities to behave with grace and courage and self-respect. They also offer the opportunity to do what I did.

First, a day after she dumped me, I sent an e-mail message. An affectionate, graceful nondesperate note of about 200 words that I worked on for three hours.

"I remember how wonderful and sweet things felt with you," I wrote.

That was good, I thought. Bold yet sensitive.

"From laughing and kissing on the tennis court to drifting in the ocean to holding each other and feeling so lucky and grateful. I just wanted to let you know that."

Not bad. Heartfelt but not clinging.

"And I wanted to own up to the toxic stuff I brought to the relationship. And to tell you how much you meant/mean to me, and to acknowledge the enormous amount of effort and kindness and love you brought to me and to our relationship."

I wanted her back so bad it gave me a stomachache. But I remembered with distress the times she had accused me of whining. I struggled over the last line for 20 minutes. I decided on "Write back if you want, but you don't need to feel obliged."

She didn't feel obliged. Which made me want to call her. Which made me want to have sex with her. Which made me want to wake up next to her, to grow old with her. Or to see her age and grow fat and ugly very quickly.

"She's dead to me," I told my friends. "I was mentally ill to have dated her," I told my friends. "Obviously a borderline personality," I told my friends.

"Why did I throw away the best thing I ever had?" I wrote in my journal. "Please, God, bring her back."

A week later I received an e-mail message. She thanked me for mine, apologized for not getting back to me sooner, admitted she was sad about how things had ended. Then came the key line: "I just hope we can have some sort of friendship going forward."

I decided this was her way of widening the dialogue. I decided this was her way of signaling that she was open to romance. I decided to ignore the advice of every single one of my friends. Not to mention my therapist. I telephoned her and suggested we try again.

She laughed. I persisted. She might have used the phrase "just friends," but I have not been able to locate those words in the detailed notes I kept of our conversation. Besides, are the details really that important? Didn't the fact that we had loved each other unconditionally and fully and intensely for 4 weeks and 3 days and 9 hours and 26 1/2 minutes mean more than mere words?

We made a date to see a movie. On the afternoon of, she canceled, pleading fatigue and an impending sore throat. She said she would rather make it another night. Was that O.K.?

But of course it was O.K. I'm an adult, after all, not a child. I am not a child. She couldn't possibly suspect that I would be bothered by a postponed date, could she? Or hurt, suspicious or deeply wounded, or reminded with a throbbing emptiness in my gut and sticking pain behind my eyes that when we were making out on tennis courts and drifting in ocean currents and discussing plans to hike in New Zealand together and holding each other in bed, nothing like a sore throat -- excuse me, an impending sore throat - - would ever keep us apart.

Feel better, I offered majestically. Call or write when you're on the mend and we'll celebrate your return to health, I suggested, manfully, powerfully. With confidence. No neediness there. No rage. No desperate, Cardiolyte-test-inducing words.

Almost a week later, on my birthday, as I was finishing a magazine profile, I received another e-mail note:

Hope you're having a v. special day!

Is the story done??

xoxo

I spent that afternoon and evening deconstructing the text. Two lines -- not good. Eleven words on my birthday -- not good. The "v." instead of very -- not so good. But perhaps I was misreading. Perhaps I was bringing my own insecurities to bear on a sweet, loving signal from cyberspace. I cross-referenced her word usage with all her other e-mail, which I had saved in a special file, and made a startling discovery. She had used the v. abbreviation before! Obviously it was a literary affectation, or just a communicative tic. I had been entirely too eager to see in it proof of withered feelings. And it would be blind, and horribly unfair, would it not, to ignore the "xo," a clear, unambiguous indication that she was ready to drift with me in the ocean currents again?

I called her to clear things up. I didn't want to misunderstand her, I said. Did she want to date or not?

She suggested I not call again.

Oh yeah? Well then, I suggested she not call again, And that she lose my e-mail address. And furthermore, if she ever saw me on the street, she had better . . .

She hung up.

I stewed. I composed bitter letters about how she was incapable of love, how she didn't recognize the gifts I had given her. I did not send the letters. (Thank you, 10 years of therapy.) I did not technically stalk her. I did ride my bike by her apartment building one evening, but I didn't stay for any legally significant amount of time. I drifted through the photos of her in my computerized slide show, accompanied by Rebecca Luker singing, "Till There Was You" over and over and over again. I lost 10 pounds in two weeks.

Then, a blinding epiphany. I shouldn't have snapped at her on the phone. Of course she had recoiled. Who wouldn't? With the insight came a great sense of calm. With the calm, a sense of hope. With the hope, a plan. If I made her understand how much I loved her, how I in no way blamed her, and how I had changed and was now neither needy nor angry, but just a man filled with love and affection and magnificent intentions, then she might take me back and we could get back to the ocean currents and tennis courts.

This time I stayed away from the phone. Spoken language was so easily misconstrued.

"I'm sorry," I wrote. "I'm really, really sorry." Then, I elaborated. "You have no idea how sorry I am." Other literary high points included: "I was such an idiot. You don't know how much I miss you. I wish you'd give us another chance, on whatever terms you want."

A week later she wrote back. She appreciated the apology. She didn't trust me. She wished me well.

Didn't trust me? No wonder she didn't want us to travel to New Zealand together. Surely if she knew about the chest pains and shortness of breath, her doubts about my sincerity would vanish. Surely if I told her about the way I listened to "The Music Man" while mooning over her digital photos, she would come back.

So I did. I told her. One more e-mail message. I told her all that. I also cited lines from "Casablanca" and "Malcolm in the Middle." I mentioned my prayers.

That was almost a month ago. In that time I have reflected on and marveled at the chilly and dignified silence that has been maintained by the women I myself have dumped over the years. I have thought of the pathetic old professor in "The Blue Angel," whom Marlene Dietrich compels to cluck like a chicken, of the poor bastard in "Endless Love," of every mopey mope whom Frank Sinatra immortalized in his greatest loser anthems. I have considered the Dalai Lama and the CosmoGirl way of life, and realized that I behaved with all the dignity of a furious and heartsick and grievously wronged Teletubby.

But I'm getting better and, finally, getting it. I know this because two weeks ago, for the first time in a long time, when a woman smiled in my direction on the subway, possibilities occurred to me. I know this because, for the first time in a long time, I'm not racing to check my e-mail every day, or gazing at photos of her.

I haven't destroyed those photos, or the letters and e-mail, as friends have advised. But I don't need to. This time she's really dead to me. Really. I mean it.

Photo (Photo by David Chelsea)