

THE RETURN OF HARD

TO GET



One June night about five years ago, I was waiting in the bar of a local restaurant for a blind date to arrive. It was one of those torrential summer days, when the sky turns black hours before sundown. It was getting later and later, and I knew my date must be standing on some street corner, looking for a cab and getting soaked. There was no telling when he'd show up.

Next to me at the bar was a handsome man in a crisp khaki suit. He looked as if he had somehow been spared the rain. We struck up a conversation. He told me he was a heart specialist at a hospital whose name I recognized as one of the more prestigious in town. Earlier that evening he'd given a lecture about smoking and heart disease to a group of women. I thought I detected a Southern accent; yes, he said, he was from a small town in Mississippi. He said he grew up in a big white house on a hill. Sitting next to me, it seemed, was a true Southern aristocrat. This was getting interesting. Then, I

glanced over to the end of the bar—and there, dripping wet and wearing a silly hat, was a man who looked mightily irritated and fit the description of my date. The doctor at my side quickly assessed the situation and politely excused himself to the men's room.

I figured that would be the last I saw of him, but I couldn't get him out of my head. All through dinner with the blind date, who turned out to be drippy in more ways than one, I was trying to work out how to track down this doctor. Even if he had the inclination, I doubted that he would be able to find me—after all, we had never even exchanged names. Before dessert was served, I'd decided to play the sleuth.

The next day, I called the hospital where he worked and asked for his department. I reached a kindly secretary. In my sweetest voice, I told her that I'd attended this doctor's lecture, and that I had some further questions but just couldn't remember his name. He was, I added, about 35 and from the South. "Oh," she said. "That's our young Dr. Thompson. Bill Thompson." She gave me his address and I mailed off a brief note, which I revised no less than six times before I put it in the box. I told Dr. Thompson that I'd enjoyed his company, however brief, and that if the idea appealed to him, perhaps we could get together again sometime. But if he couldn't see his way clear, I added, he needn't worry about it. I wouldn't be insulted if I didn't hear from him again.

A note with elegant Southern-gentle-

he had no business being in my life.

Lately, however, I've noticed that my attitude has started to change. I've become more aware of the other possible results of my actions; of the fact that not all men—even very nice, very liberal ones—can always handle (or want to handle) an aggressive approach. This seems to be more true today than it was five years ago. In those days, the pendulum had swung as far to the left as it could go: Women could do anything that men could do, and if that meant going after a desirable male with a candid announcement of attraction, so be it. Subtlety seemed like a Victorian frippery, a silly bibelot. And there was a constant egging-on from female friends; if they could do it, you could do it.

But the pendulum seems to be swinging back toward the center—and this issue of aggressiveness is only a small part of a bigger picture. In these days of moderation, women are reconsidering and perhaps revising their personal rules for living in other areas as well. What I have discovered—call me reactionary if you wish—is that the frank come-on is not necessarily effective. I find myself thinking that my mother might have known what she was talking about. I find I am thinking twice before picking up the phone—and thinking three times before I call someone who might really matter. In most ways, I hate myself for this. I wish I could wipe away this budding sensitivity to what a man will think of my actions and just keep behaving like a bulldozer. I can't understand how I—a woman who

asked me to dinner, ostensibly to discuss further business—at a romantic Italian restaurant. We talked about almost everything else—his house in the country, my house in the country, his dog and cat, my dog and cat—and we had a great time. But our evening ended sensibly at nine-thirty, when he said it had been terrific to see me and went off to another engagement. I wasn't invited.

In the old days, like last year, I would have known exactly what to do. I would have called him in a week to tell him what a pleasant time I'd had, and without hesitation, I would have asked him to join me at a movie or a play or a party or some other event. I would have expected him to be tickled.

Now I'm not so sure. It's a complicated situation, on a professional as well as a romantic level. If I ask him out, he might agree to go—but it might be our last date. George is used to having a lot of women around him, and he's probably used to being chased. If I used my "frank and direct" approach, he might consider me a new and entirely dismissible member of his large personal fan club. I also want to do more business with this man, and if I push too hard, I might lose on two counts. I am thinking of resorting to old-fashioned behavior: checking with our mutual friend to see if she can find out how he thought it went and whether he is still interested, then just sitting back and waiting to see what he does next. This does not sound like me, not one bit. This sounds like a teenager in love.

Does this mean I'm joining the rest of

(Smart Cookies Don't Phone First)

man handwriting on expensive stationery came in the mail two days later. He would be delighted to see me again. And could I have dinner that Saturday night? And for that whole summer, until he took a job at a hospital 3,000 miles away, we had a wonderful time together.

As far as I was concerned, that note worked like a dream. If I hadn't written it, we would have most likely never seen each other again. I was no shrinking violet before I wrote him, but sending that note made me consummately bold. Whenever I hesitated, I thought to myself: Why not, what do you have to lose? I kept remembering Dr. Bill Thompson.

Eventually, it got so I'd do anything—drop a note to a man I met for two minutes at a party, make the first call, set up the first dinner, unbutton the first button if I felt like it. I wasn't a game-player; that just wasn't me, no matter what my mother had advised. This is how I had it figured: If a man didn't like my frankness, my direct approach, I didn't like him and

has been known to laugh at women who sit by the phone and wait for a man to make a move—could have come to this.

I'll tell you what got me thinking. A few months ago, I met a man through work, a man who was smart, attractive, powerful and sophisticated and single—a damned unusual combination in this town. A friend of mine who knows us both phoned me shortly after I met George: He'd called her to chat, said some flattering things about me, and in the middle of the conversation, he asked her if I was unattached. For six weeks, we did an interesting dance. I came in for more conferences than were necessary, first spending an absurd amount of time on dressing and primping. We'd both be very businesslike until we thought no one was looking and then we'd be very flirtatious. I found myself removing my stern black wire-rimmed glasses, which I wear because they make me look serious and professional. I finished working on our project, and a few weeks later George

this nation in its flight back to what's safe, what's proven, what's conservative? This sounds as bad as high school, where you had to play hard to get, where there were things to fear—where you could not, under any circumstances, be forward. Is this the future?

When I have questions involving romantic strategy, I talk first to my female friends. That is what I did when I found myself still daydreaming, a week after the dinner, about George. Since they are all good aggressive women, they got tough with me. My friend Carolyn, a TV producer who's so expressive of her interests she makes me look like a pansy, said, "Call him, for heaven's sake. What are you, an adolescent? You don't have time to sit by the phone and hope. Do something. Invite him to go for a walk." My pal Laura offered this wisdom: "Treat the man as you want to be treated yourself. If you (continued on page 306)

by Cathryn Jakobson

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like him, call him." Elinor said, "What have you got to lose? So you call him and he doesn't want to be called. You just sort-ed him out early. So you forget him." Elinor suggested I send him a card—nothing too personal, just a casual little card. Not one woman told me to play it cool. We have learned not to suggest such things to one another. We have learned that it is politically incorrect.

Perhaps that is why, in this matter more than others, one has to go to the source, to the horse's mouth: What do men really think about aggressive women? When I was wondering about George, I realized that men have been telling me the answer to that question for a long time—I just haven't stopped to listen. Friends, brothers, lovers, ex-lovers, all have voiced opinions on the subject. What emerges is a picture of dangerous—albeit sometimes thrilling—territory. When a woman makes the moves, she takes a risk, and sometimes—in some situations, with some guys—she loses right off the bat. Should you take that risk? Men's answers add up to a resounding *maybe*. But between the lines, a more explicit answer emerges: If you decide to go that route, be very, very careful—and expect to lose a few.

The Initial Come-on

Guys have one verb that describes all approaches by women—a verb that might shed some light on how such approaches are viewed. It is "to come on," as in "when a woman comes on to me." There are certain guys who feel that come-ons are best left to the men. "As far as I'm concerned," says Sam, an investment banker, "the best part of starting a relationship is the thrill of the chase—and the guys I know down on Wall Street agree. Once a woman comes on to you, a lot of that is gone. And I, for one, really miss it. She should keep her feelings under wraps, at least until it is clear that the man is seriously interested."

Sam and his Wall Street friends do not speak for all men, however. Some men say they enjoy being approached—if she's the right kind of woman and "comes on" in a way that makes him comfortable. John, a handsome divorced doctor, says, "As a man, I feel free to walk up to a woman at a party or in a bar and say, 'Pardon me, but I just want to tell you that you look terrific.' I think in 1987 a woman should have just as much right to say that as a man."

That's liberated. But John is from Boston, where feminism still has a tenacious hold on men of a certain age. Ron, a friend who seems to have a different date every night, is perhaps more representative. "Listen, I think it's fine for the woman to make the approach," he says. "I'm kind of shy. And if a woman shows me she's receptive or would welcome my

company, she makes me feel a lot more comfortable." But there's a caveat—and it's a big one. "If a woman does make the approach," Ron adds, "she has to be ready to be rejected, like guys are rejected all the time. My experience is that most women can't handle it."

What about asking a man for a first date? Even the boldest among us has to admit that this area is a potential minefield—and most men agree. "It's bad form," says my friend Sam, without having to think about it. "To me, this is the strongest possible turn-off. I hate being chased. I hate having women call me up on the phone. I hate women who stick notes under my door or ask me out for beers. That's just too pushy for me."

Not surprisingly, my liberal doctor-friend John doesn't mind pursuit—as long as he finds the woman attractive. But how does she figure out if he thinks she's attractive? "I think that's pretty clear, even if you just meet someone for a few minutes," he says. "You have to be sensitive to how the other person is reacting. Usually, if there's a spark, you both know it. And if there's a spark, and the woman calls me up, that's great. She's very interested. She's hot. She doesn't want to wait. To me this is wonderful."

It's particularly wonderful, says John, if he hasn't called the woman because he wasn't sure of her romantic status. "When you get into your late twenties," he points out, "it seems like most women are married or at least living with somebody. It's entirely possible to have this very hot exchange with somebody at a party and to be nervous about calling her because you don't know if she's single. If she calls you, you're home free."

What a lot of men seem to hate is subterfuge. "If a woman is going to come on to me, is going to ask me out," says Michael, an architect, "then she should just do it. What I cannot bear are stupid, half-assed attempts. If she has enough balls to call, she ought to have enough to say, 'Why don't we go have a drink.' If I didn't call her in the first place, I don't want to *then* have to make the first move." Even *laissez-faire* John believes that the move has to be bold and straightforward. "She shouldn't try to disguise what she's doing," he says.

The danger in asking someone out is that so many men have hidden programs for what they think is the *right way* for a woman to go about it. Is there *any way* to ask a man out without looking desperate? "You can usually ask a man to have a drink with you and get away with it," says Michael. "But you can only ask him once. Never, under any circumstances, make the second call. If he's interested, he'll call you. You have to wait. Even if you have to wait a month."

What about shy men, you say? Could a man be worried about getting rejected and not ask a woman out for that reason?

"It's possible," says Michael. "He might not ask her for a date because he was nervous about getting turned down. But if he doesn't ask her out for a second date, I think you can be pretty sure shyness is not the reason."

Accoutrements: Business Cards, Notes, Flowers

I remember being so relieved when I got my first job and my first set of nice, thick white engraved cards. I remember practicing opening my purse and casually extracting a card before going out one night; I wanted to do it right, like the cool girls. That was ten years ago. Now, I'm afraid that giving a card to a man who hasn't asked me for one has started to look like an unwelcome solicitation.

The reception isn't always that bad—but it's often mixed. "When a woman I meet at a party gives me her business card, I think it's refreshing," says my friend Ron. "I think it shows that she has a lot of self-confidence, and to me, that's great." But Tad, an old housemate from college who has since made it big in the theater world, complains, "I can't tell whether a woman is giving me her business card because she wants to choreograph my next play, or because she's interested in me as a person."

When it comes to the more traditional accoutrements of courting—notes, flowers, gifts—the tables are particularly hard to turn. There's a simple answer to this one: *Don't do it*. The evidence:

"No go on cute little notes," says Michael, "unless you are sure—and I mean absolutely sure—that the guy had an equally fabulous time. A note can easily strike the wrong chord. The woman sends it because she's feeling good and romantic and the man opens it and it reads like a plea for more attention, which he might not feel like giving right then. It's complicated, but I think notes do more harm than good."

Presents are just as dangerous, Michael feels. "A lot of times, a present feels like a bribe, and I don't like to be bribed. It's especially bad when the emotional value of the gift exceeds the emotional value of the relationship. Like when you get the feeling that since she's giving you a cashmere sweater, you're supposed to give her love, an engagement ring and a house in the suburbs. I don't make deals that way."

Ron has even done some sociological analysis on this subject. "I like to call it the latching-on phenomenon," he says. "It happens with celebrations and gifts: They get planned months or weeks ahead, which sort of assures that the relationship lasts that long."

My cousin Paul once told me this story: "This woman I'd been seeing on and off for a month made this tremendous deal about my birthday. She started talking
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about it the minute she met me. On the actual day, she cooked me dinner, then she piled me into a taxicab blindfolded, and I was driven uptown, and I got out of the taxi in Times Square, and I looked around, and she checked her watch, and she pointed me at the sign where the ball drops, and there, whumpf, the sign read 'Happy Birthday, Paul.' With twenty-four candles. I didn't know what to say. I stopped seeing her the following week."

The Office: Does the Come-on Work at Work?

Everything romantic that happens at work has a double edge to it, and that holds true for making an overt move on the guy in the office next door. Consequences are exaggerated—if he turns you down, you've got to live with it every day. Men share these apprehensions, especially if your intentions aren't clear and they don't want to respond inappropriately. Will, a lawyer friend, has sworn off going out with women from the office. "Having a woman approach you at work is tough," he says. "It can get very uncomfortable, and I don't think it's worth it. It's hard to know, if a woman knocks on your door and asks if you want to have a beer, whether she means, 'Hey baby, I crave your body,' or whether she just wants to have a beer."

On the other hand, Sam, the investment banker, is *more* receptive to a move from a woman if it happens in an office context. "Put it this way," he says. "If you work late, in a high-pressure, high-paying job, where else are you going to meet women? If you're sitting there with one of them until two in the morning, and she initiates a little something, it's all right with me. I mean, she shouldn't go overboard and do something stupid like leave a bouquet of flowers on your desk, which somebody did one time. She should let you know, but subtly."

Unbuttoning That Button

Do you know many single men who routinely turn down offers of sex from nice girls? On the other hand, just because they hop into bed one night doesn't mean they'll become a permanent fixture in your life either. And when you're making the sexual moves, there's that fragile element to keep in mind: the male ego.

John, the doctor, in the midst of an affair initiated by a woman, has mixed feelings about sexual aggressiveness. "There's no easier way to make a man feel inadequate," he says. "It can be really, really intimidating. You're sitting there in her apartment, she's cooked you dinner, it's getting late, you've been fooling around, either you are going to say it or she is. And I, for one, am reticent about making the first move when I'm sitting in a woman's apartment. Eventually, there are only two choices. She can say, 'It's

time for you to leave,' or she can say, 'Shall we go into the bedroom?' It's clearer to me that she's interested if she's agreed to come up to my place."

Paul confesses that although there are times when he'd give his right arm for a clear invitation into a woman's bedroom, there are other times when he'd like a way out. "What if, for one reason or another, you don't want to?" he asks. "That really puts the thing on a whole different footing. Now if you had said, let's go to bed, and she said no, you might be able to sit there for another hour. If a woman asks and you say no, you have no choice. You've blown the whole thing and you have to leave. A guy can deal with it when a woman says 'not yet.' But a man who says 'not yet'? Did you ever hear of that? It's sort of now or never."

Many men, many opinions. And yet, enough of a consensus emerges to at least tell us this: It's time for women to open their eyes and take a good look at how men want us to treat them. How is that, exactly? Like men.

There are times when everything clicks between a man and a woman, and almost any kind of behavior is acceptable. You can feel it when that happens, when you're both so dazzled you can't even remember who asked whom out. But there are other, less perfect situations—when there's attraction, but some hesitation, too—when the handling, the packaging, makes all the difference. The truth is that some men are delighted when a woman does the asking, but many are not. Some must have the thrill of the chase. If you're convinced he's hanging back because he's shy, he thinks you're married or because he's overly polite, go ahead and drop some hints. But if he simply hasn't made up his mind yet, your phone call or note may not sway him in your direction; in fact, it may send him away. After all, there is some basic training involved here: Many men feel sexiest when they're doing at least some of the asking.

I think it behooves us to stop offering each other these pearls of feminism, to stop saying, "So, why don't you call him," to stop saying, "So, why don't you ask him out," to stop saying, "Sure, send him a card to remind him that you're alive, why not?" until we've done our best to analyze the man and the circumstances. I'm beginning to think that there is beauty in subtlety, that perhaps more budding relationships have been ruined than have been furthered by cute and supposedly casual greeting cards. Take a measure of the current shape of the male psyche before sending one.

Having said that, I've also resolved, more or less, how I will handle this thing with George. I will let it go. I will approach him as what he is: a business associate who is capable of pushing a great many dollars my way. I won't screw that

up for a good-night kiss. I won't go lurching after him like a drunken sailor after a barmaid.

On the other hand, there is that small elegant cocktail party I'm invited to next week, the one in the penthouse on Park Avenue, and a few people he'd like to know are going to be there. Maybe if I just dropped a very casual invitation . . .

Maybe not.

Cathryn Jakobson, a freelance writer based in New York, wrote about long-distance love affairs in the February issue.

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