

IS HE
A
LOVER
OR
A
LEAVER



It's a light summer evening and you're at a bar sipping wine with some friends when a pleasant-looking young man catches your eye. You exchange glances. A minute later, he comes over and says hello. Something about him—his voice, his hair, his manner—is intriguing. You talk quietly for a while. Maybe you dance. He says it's too loud in here and suggests some cognac at his place. You say okay. Once there, you drink some more, you talk some more, and then he puts his arm around you, says he likes you very much and wouldn't you like to stay the night? He leads you to his bed and starts unbuttoning your blouse. You don't resist.

You make love and then you fall asleep. In the morning, he makes you some toast and cof- (continued)
by john sedgwick

what to
do
when a
guy
keeps his
close
encounters
casual



IF

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fee and then calls you a cab. Before you go, he asks for your phone number. You write it down for him. He picks it up and looks at it. There is an awkward pause. Then he says, "I'll call you. We should take a fast trip to Acapulco. Or maybe a slow boat to China. You're the best thing that's happened to me in years."

And you think he will call. You assume he's charmed, interested, maybe even hooked. It's a rare woman who doesn't. Warning bells may be sounding in your head, telling you you're being overly trusting, but, nevertheless, you end up thinking about him for the next few days. When the phone rings, you somehow anticipate the sound of his voice. After you've been out, you come home thinking you'll find a message on your answering machine saying, "Hi, remember me?" But days go by, then weeks and no call comes. You may even begin to wonder what you did wrong.

A better question, though, is what's wrong with him? What could be going on inside that man's head?

what do men want?

Casual sex—a one-night stand, a romantic weekend trip, any brief encounter that doesn't carry much emotional weight—has long been a game played by the man's rules. Usually, he makes the approach, steers the liaison along and then takes his leave with a line like "I'll call you" or "I'll see you soon." And usually the woman entertains some expectation that he will. So why does that telephone call or the second date so rarely get made? Why do so many men come on so strong—only to fade so fast? Just what, exactly, do they mean by those famous last lines?

My friend Ed says that he is most inclined to employ the open-ended "I'll call you" when he is in a tight spot—for instance, if a woman he's just slept with looks at him the next morning with baleful eyes as if to say, "Is that all you wanted from me?" "At that point," he says, "you can't tell her, 'That's it, sweetheart. I never want to see you again.' Instead you say, 'I'll call you. I really loved last night.' You've got to tell her that she'll hear from you again in this lifetime. Otherwise she feels used, and who wants that?"

From the man's point of view, then, when he says he'll call or follow up, he doesn't necessarily mean it. That's just one possibility, and for Ed and most of the men I know, it's a rather remote one. More likely, he means that he probably won't reappear or even, gloomiest of all, that he definitely won't. "I'll call you" is a line," says Sol Gordon, professor of child and family studies at Syracuse University and coauthor of *Raising a Child Conserva-*

tively in a Sexually Permissive World (Simon & Schuster, 1983). "It's like 'The check is in the mail.' Nobody really means it."

In truth, most men recognize that "I'll call you" has become something of a cliché. "Sometimes," says another friend, Alex, "I find myself trying to close off a conversation the morning after thinking to myself, 'Don't say it! Don't say you'll call her!' But then I say it anyway. And I hate myself for it."

But if a man doesn't really mean it, one might ask, then why does he say it? The answer is because no other phrase concludes the event quite so neatly. And, in a way, it is fully in keeping with all that has gone before, the final line in a night of lines, from "I really like your eyes" through "Let's go back to my place for a drink," and possibly including "I'm not married" and "I don't have herpes" to "You were wonderful." Like all the other lines, it disguises the true nature of this casual transaction. It sends the woman off in her taxicab glowing with the idea that even though the occasion had all the earmarks of the one-night stand, in her case it was something more, a genuine attraction, a romance on the wing.

But the question of differing interpretations of signals and words points up the more fundamental issue of the lingering differences between the sexes. Despite the women's movement's positive effect, there are still plenty of men for whom sex is an end in itself, while there are still plenty of women who are looking for a deeper emotional rapport, even for love. And it is during these brief encounters that these opposing expectations war most fiercely. Alex is quite candid about this. "I look at it this way," he says. "My penis gets me in a lot of trouble. You know the expression 'A stiff cock knows no conscience'? It's really true for me. The physical need is there. With a woman, I tend to push and push and push until I finally get what I want. I'm not a cad; I don't promise love and marriage. But most women want to feel that you like them for more than just their bodies. So a line like 'I'll call you' may get the woman to think you're just as interested in a relationship as she is. I mean you can't just tell her that all you wanted was to get laid. It gets you off the hook."

Other men use it to conceal a change of heart. A man might have genuinely thought a woman was *the* woman of his dreams, but in the cold light of morning, the picture doesn't look so rosy.

Such a reappraisal isn't necessarily the woman's fault. External factors often come into play. A big one is alcohol, which frequently fuels such sexual encounters of the casual kind. Not only does it lower inhibitions, it also tends to enhance the radiance of the other party. By morning, however, the glow has worn off and his head is pounding with a raging hangover. No woman looks beautiful

under those conditions—nor, for that matter, do most men. Nevertheless, he's likely to respond by trying to get her out of his apartment and out of his life as quickly and painlessly as possible. "I'll call you" is his getaway line.

And some men consider a perfunctory parting line a show of good manners similar to the compliment they'd pay a hostess whose dinner party was, in fact, a colossal bore. They think that the brutal truth—"I'm not interested in a committed relationship"—could be devastating to a woman. They feel that the promise to get in touch is a kindness. This way, these men figure, the grim reality won't take hold for a while, and when the woman finally realizes that he is not going to get in touch with her again, he will be safely distant. As Alex puts it, "You don't want to hurt her." Then he adds sheepishly, "Right then, anyway."

Finally, a parting line like "I'll call you" insures that the man stays in control of the relationship. By keeping the ball in his court, he can keep the affair as casual as he wants—and protect himself from rejection. As my friend Stan put it, "I don't mean to hurt a woman I've had casual sex with. But I sure don't want to be the one who gets dumped."

fooling around with denial

In general, men don't set out to hurt the women they get involved with casually. And they don't like knowing they've done so. That's why many of them have all sorts of tactics for insuring that they aren't around to watch the pain hit home. One man told me that he makes a point of getting out his address book when it comes time to write down a woman's number, since, as he says, "It doesn't create the right impression to use a crayon on an empty Marlboro box. You need something that looks more permanent." Consequently, his address book is filled with the names of strangers, all that remains of his nights of endless love.

And when Stan discovers that a woman has taken him at his word and waited by the phone in increasing misery—which he generally finds out because she finally calls him—he does what he can to make her feel better. "I don't want to be mean," he says. "If she's really nice, I'll go out with her again, maybe once or twice. I won't sleep with her, though. I'll try to break it off slowly by spacing out the evenings. Course, for all I know, that probably just ends up screwing her up all the worse." And what's his parting line on that last night out? Yup. "I'll call you."

Happily, some men are less opaque. When Rich sleeps with a woman he is not serious about, he tells her afterward that he'll call, and he does the next day to

arrange a date for coffee or a drink. There, as gently as he can, he tells the woman the truth. "I just say, 'Listen, I'm sorry but I'm not ready to get into a steady relationship,'" Rick tells me. "I'd be happy to see her again, but just as a friend." And most women seem to appreciate his candor. "They don't quite congratulate me for my honesty," he says, "but they don't yell and scream either. And at least I don't feel like a creep."

can you reform him?

Of course, a woman may not necessarily feel forlorn about the end of the affair. She may be just as happy as the man to consider the previous night's activities simply recreational. Or she may have decided that the man is a jerk and have already begun to mentally phase him out of her life. But if a woman is looking for more than empty promises from a man, what should she do?

Mark Gerzon, author of *A Choice of Heroes: The Changing Faces of American Manhood* (Houghton Mifflin, 1984), believes that the whole nasty situation between men and women only arises because contemporary American society is bound so loosely. In other, more traditional cultures, he explains, matches would never be made so randomly. "Such a significant event as the meeting of lovers would not be left to chance—to an introduction at a bar, say, or a party where the two would just bump into each other." One of the unhappy consequences of these brief encounters for a woman, Gerzon feels, is that they leave her with no way to force a man to make good on whatever promises he's made, since the assignation has occurred without any social sanctions. "Arrangements have been made in a complete social vacuum," says Gerzon. "There's no grandfather, no brother, no father around to monitor the man's actions. So it's the easiest thing in the world for him to lie and get away with it."

Don't misunderstand. Gerzon does not recommend bringing Dad along as a chaperon. Instead, he suggests that a woman recognize the encounter for what it is and know what she wants out of it. If she's looking for "no strings," fine. But if she wants a more substantial relationship—one that lasts more than one night—she shouldn't wait until the morning after to tell her date so. "The standard way these days seems to be sex first, talk afterward," says Gerzon. Women forget that they have a great deal of power in these situations; they have the power to say no. They don't have to let men decide for them. Gerzon suggests that a woman protect herself by following the "talk first, sex later" rule. That way, she can move

beyond the surface platitudes and find out whether she really likes the guy. And if she doesn't, she can always call a cab and go home—alone.

My male friends actually are surprised that women don't do this more often. "I know it sounds old-fashioned, but I think women miscalculate," says Alex. "It's like they just comply. They give sex away." Far from dampening the man's ardor, resistance by a woman often makes him all the more interested. It's a challenge! And if he asks you for your phone number, you can bet he'll call. Better yet, turn the tables, and ask him for his.

Interestingly, many of the men I spoke to admitted that they really don't enjoy casual sex all that much anyway; they're just conditioned to go for the "score." "I always feel a little soiled afterward," says Ed. Unfortunately, he can't help but think of his date as the contaminant. In fact, many men seem to feel that by rejecting the woman with whom they had a one-night stand, they also reject the very notion of casual sex. Deep down, most of them would prefer more "meaningful" relationships. As Stan told me, "When I meet a girl that I really like, I never sleep with her. At least not right away. I want to get to know her."

Ed feels the same way. He says that when he really does plan to see a woman he's met, he would never exit with a line so vague as "I'll call you." When he genuinely intends to pursue the relationship, he is more specific, saying, for example, "I'll call you Thursday evening to try and set something up for the weekend—maybe a concert on Saturday night."

The sad fact is that a getaway line like "I'll call you" is just as much a trap for men as it is for women. It commits a man to the lie that he really enjoys having sex with strangers night after night. Deep down, he would probably just as soon play the whole affair out differently. Chances are, he's looking for love, too, or at least intimacy—not just another score to tell his buddies about. When he doesn't call, it's the woman who feels the pain immediately—but it's the man who loses most in the end. ●

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