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Confessions of a Seduction Addict

By ELIZABETH GILBERT JUNE 24, 2015

It started with a boy I met at summer camp and ended with the man for whom I left my first husband. In between, I careened from one intimate entanglement to the next — dozens of them — without so much as a day off between romances. You might have called me a serial monogamist, except that I was never exactly monogamous. Relationships overlapped, and those overlaps were always marked by exhausting theatricality: sobbing arguments, shaming confrontations, broken hearts. Still, I kept doing it. I couldn't not do it.

I can't say that I was always looking for a better man. I often traded good men for bad ones; character didn't much matter to me. I wasn't exactly seeking love, either, regardless of what I might have claimed. I can't even say it was the sex. Sex was just the gateway drug for me, a portal to the much higher high I was really after, which was seduction.

Seduction is the art of coercing somebody to desire you, of orchestrating somebody else's longings to suit your own hungry agenda. Seduction was never a casual sport for me; it was more like a heist, adrenalizing and urgent. I would plan the heist for months, scouting out the target, looking for unguarded entries. Then I would break into his deepest vault, steal all his emotional currency and spend it on myself.

If the man was already involved in a committed relationship, I knew that I

didn't need to be prettier or better than his existing girlfriend; I just needed to be different. (The novel doesn't always win out over the familiar, mind you, but it often does.) The trick was to study the other woman and to become her opposite, thereby positioning myself to this man as a sparkling alternative to his regular life.

Soon enough, and sure enough, I might begin to see that man's gaze toward me change from indifference, to friendship, to open desire. That's what I was after: the telekinesis-like sensation of steadily dragging somebody's fullest attention toward me and only me. My guilt about the other woman was no match for the intoxicating knowledge that — somewhere on the other side of town — somebody couldn't sleep that night because he was thinking about me. If he needed to sneak out of his house after midnight in order to call, better still. That was power, but it was also affirmation. I was someone's irresistible treasure. I loved that sensation, and I needed it, not sometimes, not even often, but always.

I might indeed win the man eventually. But over time (and it wouldn't take long), his unquenchable infatuation for me would fade, as his attention returned to everyday matters. This always left me feeling abandoned and invisible; love that could be quenched was not nearly enough love for me. As soon as I could, then, I would start seducing somebody else, by turning myself into an entirely different woman, in order to attract an entirely different man. These episodes of shape-shifting cost me dearly. I would lose weight, sleep, dignity, clarity. As anyone who has ever watched a werewolf movie knows, transmutation is excruciating and terrifying, but once that process has been set into motion — once you have glimpsed that full moon — it cannot be reversed. I could endure these painful episodes only by assuring myself: "This is the last time. This guy is the one."

Back then, if you asked me what I was up to, I might have claimed that I was a helpless romantic — and how can you judge that? If really cornered, I might have argued that I was a revolutionary feminist, taking brazen agency

over my own sexuality: I was Rodolphe Boulanger in these stories, and never pathetic little Emma Bovary.

In my mid-20s, I married, but not even matrimony slowed me down. Predictably, I grew restless and lonely. Soon enough I seduced someone new; the marriage collapsed. But it was worse than just that. Before my divorce agreement was even signed, I was already breaking up with the guy I had broken up my marriage for. You know you've got intimacy issues when, in the space of a few short months, you find yourself visiting two completely different couples' counselors, with two completely different men on your arm, in order to talk about two completely different emotional firestorms. Trying to keep all my various story lines straight (Whom am I angry at, again? Who is angry at me now? Whose office is this?) made my hands shake and my mind splinter.

At our last counseling session, my soon-to-be-ex-boyfriend and I argued bitterly, and we ran off in different directions. I came home in tears, only to find a string of distressing phone messages from my divorce lawyer: Nothing but ruin on that front too. Then I did an unusual thing. I did not grab the telephone and call yet another man. Instead, I asked myself, "What are you doing with your life?"

For the first time, I forced myself to admit that I had a problem — indeed, that I was a problem. Tinkering with other people's most vulnerable emotions didn't make me a romantic; it just made me a swindler. Lying and cheating didn't make me brazen; it just made me a needy coward. Stealing other women's boyfriends didn't make me a revolutionary feminist; it just made me a menace. I hated that it took me almost 20 years to realize this. There are 16-year-old kids who know better than to behave this way. It felt shameful. But once I got it, I really got it: There is no way to stop a destructive behavior, except to stop.

I spent the next six months celibate and serious, working with a good therapist, trying to learn if I even existed at all when I wasn't blazing in the

heat of somebody's longing gaze. Then one afternoon I ran into a guy I liked. We went for a long walk in the park. Flirted. Laughed. It was sweet. Eventually he said, "Would you like to come back to my apartment with me?"

Yes! My God, how I wanted to unwrap this man like a Christmas present!

But I also didn't want to: I was only beginning to pull myself together, and I feared unraveling.

Uncertain, I tried something radically new. I said, "Do you mind if I take a moment to think about this?"

"Sure," he said.

We sat down on a park bench, and I got very quiet, picturing all the imaginable outcomes of this decision. The man took a magazine from his backpack and started reading, just to pass the time. This helped, actually. It proved the absence of intoxicating desperation. This was not seduction; this was merely two sober adults, deciding whether they should get more involved with each other.

I said: "You know what, my friend? I don't think I'm ready for this."

He said: "No problem. Let's get Italian ices, instead."

We spent a few more pleasant hours together, then said our goodbyes. I walked away alone but calm. And that's when I realized that the better part of my life had already begun.

Elizabeth Gilbert is the author of the memoir "Eat, Pray, Love." Her new book, "Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear," will be published by Riverhead Books in September.

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