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Love in the Time of Darwinism

A report from the chaotic postfeminist dating scene, where only the strong survive

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Earlier this year, I published an article in City Journal called "[Child-Man in the Promised Land](#)." The piece elicited a roaring flood of mailed and blogged responses, mostly from young men who didn't much care for its title (a reference to Claude Brown's 1965 novel *Manchild in the Promised Land*) or its thesis: that too many single young males (SYMs) were lingering in a hormonal limbo between adolescence and adulthood, shunning marriage and children, and whiling away their leisure hours with *South Park* reruns, marathon sessions of *World of Warcraft*, and *Maxim* lists of the ten best movie fart scenes.

It would be easy enough to hold up some of the callow ranting that the piece inspired as proof positive of the child-man's existence. But the truth is that my correspondents' objections gave me pause. Their argument, in effect, was that the SYM is putting off traditional markers of adulthood—one wife, two kids, three bathrooms—not because he's immature but because he's angry. He's angry because he thinks that young women are dishonest, self-involved, slutty, manipulative, shallow, controlling, and gold-digging. He's angry because he thinks that the culture disses all things male. He's angry because he thinks that marriage these days is a raw deal for men.

Here's Jeff from Middleburg, Florida: "I am not going to hitch my wagon to a woman . . . who is more into her abs, thighs, triceps, and plastic surgery. A woman who seems to have forgotten that she did graduate high school and that it's time to act accordingly." Jeff, meet another of my respondents, Alex: "Maybe we turn to video games not because we are trying to run away from the responsibilities of a 'grown-up life' but because they are a better companion than some disease-ridden bar tramp who is only after money and a free ride." Care for one more? This is from Dean in California: "Men are finally waking up to the ever-present fact that traditional marriage, or a committed relationship, with its accompanying socially imposed requirements of being wallets with legs for women, is an empty and meaningless drudgery." You can find the same themes posted throughout websites like *AmericanWomenSuck*, *NoMarriage*, *MGTOW* (Men Going Their Own Way), and *Eternal Bachelor* ("Give modern women the husband they deserve. None").

The reason for all this anger, I submit, is that the dating and mating scene is in chaos. SYMs of the postfeminist era are moving around in a Babel of miscues, cross-purposes, and half-conscious, contradictory female expectations that are alternately proudly egalitarian and coyly traditional. And because middle-class men *and* women are putting off marriage well into their twenties and thirties as they pursue Ph.D.s, J.D.s, or their first \$50,000 salaries, the opportunities for heartbreak and humiliation are legion. Under these harsh conditions, young men are looking for a new framework for understanding what (or, as they might put it, WTF) women want. So far, their answer is unlikely to satisfy anyone—either women or, in the long run, themselves.

Now, men and women have probably been a mystery to one another since the time human beings were in trees; one reason people developed so many rules around courtship was that they needed some way to bridge the Great Sexual Divide. By the early twentieth century, things had evolved so that in the United States, at any rate, a man knew the following: he was supposed to call for a date; he was supposed to pick up his date; he was supposed to take his date out, say, to a dance, a movie, or an ice-cream joint; if the date went well, he was supposed to call for

another one; and at some point, if the relationship seemed charged enough—or if the woman got pregnant—he was supposed to ask her to marry him. Sure, these rules could end in a midlife crisis and an unhealthy fondness for gin, but their advantage was that anyone with an emotional IQ over 70 could follow them.

Today, though, there is no standard scenario for meeting and mating, or even relating. For one thing, men face a situation—and I'm not exaggerating here—new to human history. Never before have men wooed women who are, at least theoretically, their equals—socially, professionally, and sexually.

By the time men reach their twenties, they have years of experience with women as equal competitors in school, on soccer fields, and even in bed. Small wonder if they initially assume that the women they meet are after the same things they are: financial independence, career success, toned triceps, and sex.

But then, when an SYM walks into a bar and sees an attractive woman, it turns out to be nothing like that. The woman may be hoping for a hookup, but she may also be looking for a husband, a co-parent, a sperm donor, a relationship, a threesome, or a temporary place to live. She may want one thing in November and another by Christmas. "I've gone through phases in my life where I bounce between serial monogamy, Very Serious Relationships and extremely casual sex," writes Megan Carpentier on Jezebel, a popular website for young women. "I've slept next to guys on the first date, had sex on the first date, allowed no more than a cheek kiss, dispensed with the date-concept altogether after kissing the guy on the way to his car, fucked a couple of close friends and, more rarely, slept with a guy I didn't care if I ever saw again." Okay, wonders the ordinary guy with only middling psychic powers, which is it tonight?

In fact, young men face a bewildering multiplicity of female expectations and desire. Some women are comfortable asking, "What's your name again?" when they look across the pillow in the morning. But plenty of others are looking for Mr. Darcy. In her interviews with 100 unmarried, college-educated young men and women, Jillian Straus, author of *Unhooked Generation*, discovered that a lot of women had "personal scripts"—explicit ideas about how a guy should act, such as walking his date home or helping her on with her coat. Straus describes a 26-year-old journalist named Lisa fixed up for a date with a 29-year-old social worker. When he arrives at her door, she's delighted to see that he's as good-looking as advertised. But when they walk to his car, he makes his first mistake: he fails to open the car door for her. Mistake Number Two comes a moment later: "So, what would you like to do?" he asks. "Her idea of a date is that the man plans the evening and takes the woman out," Straus explains. But how was the hapless social worker supposed to know that? In fact, Doesn't-Open-the-Car-Door Guy might well have been chewed out by a female colleague for reaching for the office door the previous week.

The cultural muddle is at its greatest when the dinner check arrives. The question of who grabs it is a subject of endless discussion on the hundreds of Internet dating sites. The general consensus among women is that a guy should pay on a first date: they see it as a way for him to demonstrate interest. Many men agree, but others find the presumption confusing. Aren't the sexes equal? In fact, at this stage in their lives, women may well be in a *better* position to pick up the tab: according to a 2005 study by Queens College demographer Andrew Beveridge, college-educated women working full-time are earning more than their male counterparts in a number of cities, including New York, Chicago, Boston, and Minneapolis.

Sure, girls can—and do—ask guys out for dinner and pick up the check without missing a beat. But that doesn't clarify matters, men complain. Women can take a Chinese-menu approach to gender roles. They can be all "Let me pay for the movie tickets" on Friday night and "A single rose? That's it?" on Valentine's Day. This isn't equality, say the male-contents; it's a ratification of female privilege and, worse, caprice. "Women seemingly have decided that they want it all (and deserve it, too)," Kevin from Ann Arbor writes. "They want to compete equally, and have the privileges of their mother's generation. They want the executive position, AND the ability to stay home with children and come back into the workplace at or beyond the position at which they left. They want the bad boy and

the metrosexual.”

This attraction to bad boys is by far guys’ biggest complaint about contemporary women. Young men grew up hearing from their mothers, their teachers, and Oprah that women wanted sensitive, kind, thoughtful, intelligent men who were in touch with their feminine sides, who shared their feelings, who enjoyed watching *Ally McBeal* rather than *Beavis and Butt-Head*. Yeah, right, sneer a lot of veterans of the scene. Women don’t want Ashley Wilkes; they’re hot for Rhett Butler, for macho men with tight abs and an emotional range to match. One popular dating guru, David DeAngelo, ranks “Being Too Much of a Nice Guy” as Number One on his list of the “Ten Most Dangerous Mistakes Men Make with Women.” At a website with the evocative name RelationShit.com (“Brutally honest dating advice for the cynical, bitter, and jaded” and sociological cousin of DatingIsHell.net), the most highly trafficked pages are those dedicated to the question of why women don’t like good guys. A website (and book) called Hot Chicks with Douchebags rubs it in by offering pictures of jerks—we know by their ripped jeans, five o’clock shadow, gelled hair, and bling—standing next to adoring, bikini-clad blondes.

According to a “Recovering Nice Guy” writing on Craigslist, the female preference for jerks and “assholes,” as they’re also widely known, lies behind women’s age-old lament, “What happened to all the nice guys?” His answer: “You did. You ignored the nice guy. You used him for emotional intimacy without reciprocating, in kind, with physical intimacy.” Women, he says, are actually not attracted to men who hold doors for them, give them hinted-for Christmas gifts, or listen to their sorrows. Such a man, our Recovering Nice Guy continues, probably “came to realize that, if he wanted a woman like you, he’d have to act more like the boyfriend that you had. He probably cleaned up his look, started making some money, and generally acted like more of an asshole than he ever wanted to be.”

Adding to the bitterness of many SYMs is the feeling that the entire culture is a you-go-girl cheering section. When our guy was a boy, the media prattled on about “girl power,” parents took their daughters to work, and a mysterious plague seemed to have killed off boys, at least white ones, from school textbooks. To this day, male-bashing is the lingua franca of situation comedies and advertising: take the dimwitted television dads from Homer Simpson to Ray Romano to Tim Allen, or the guy who starts a cooking fire to be put out by his multitasking wife, who is already ordering takeout. Further, it’s hard to overstate the distrust of young men who witnessed divorce up close and personal as they were growing up. Not only have they become understandably wary of till-death-do-us-part promises; they frequently suspect that women are highway robbers out to relieve men of their earnings, children, and deepest affections.

As the disenchanting SYM sees it, then, resistance to settling down is a rational response to a dating environment designed and ruled by women with only their own interests in mind. “Men see all of this, and wonder if it’s really worth risking all in the name of ‘romance’ and ‘growing up,’ ” a correspondent who calls himself Wytchfinde explains. “After all, if women can be hedonistic and change the rules in midstream when it suits them, why shouldn’t men? Why should men be responsible when women refuse to look into the mirror at their own lack of accountability?”

So, men like Wytchfinde conclude: No more Mister Nice Guy! They will dump all those lessons from their over-feminized childhood and adolescence. They will join what the *Boston Globe* has called the “Menaissance.” And they will buy titles like *The Alphabet of Manliness* (K is for Knockers, Q is for Quickies), *The Retrosexual Manual*, *Being the Strong Man a Woman Wants*, and actor Jim Belushi’s recent *Real Men Don’t Apologize*.

By far the most important philosopher of the Menaissance is Charles Darwin. The theory that human sexual preferences evolved from the time that hominids successfully reproduced in the primeval African grasslands can explain the mystery of women’s preference for macho—or alpha—males. At the same time, evolutionary theory

gives the former wuss permission to pursue massive amounts of sex with an endless assortment of women. Finally, the emphasis that Darwinism places on natural selection encourages him to adapt to the brutal current sexual ecosystem. Culture, in both its feminist and Emily Post forms, hasn't won him any favor with women, so he will embrace Nature in all its rude harshness.

For one illustration of dating à la Darwin, consider what's known as the Seduction Community. The Community is a loose network of dating coaches, gurus, and their followers whose philosophical origins lie variously in Darwin, Norman Vincent Peale, and hyperlogical geekdom. Women want alpha males, the Seduction Community agrees; with some effort at self-improvement, any man can learn the game—Game, as it is reverently known—that will turn him into a Pick Up Artist (PUA). A highly skilled PUA can get any woman, even an HB10 (Hot Babe who is a perfect 10; Game has more acronyms and rankings than the Department of Defense does). It's impossible to know just how many wannabe PUAs there are out there, but judging from the multitude of websites like AlphaSeduction, Fast Seduction 101, Grow Your Game, SeductionTutor, and The Seduction Chronicles, as well as chat rooms, conferences, ads for seduction gurus, boot camps not just in the United States but all over Europe and parts of Asia, and books, including Neil Strauss's 2005 best-selling *The Game*, their numbers are considerable.

Game is best understood as an SYM attempt to bring order to contemporary dating confusion. "Things don't make sense anymore, that's why we need pickup," one commenter on Fast Seduction 101 explains. It teaches the ordinary nice guy—in Gamespeak, the Average Frustrated Chump (AFC)—how to reinvent himself to survive in a ruthless dating environment. That means desensitizing the AFC to rejection and, alas, building up his jerk quotient. Teachers encourage clients to project confidence and sexual energy, what is called, depending on the guru, "cocky funny" or "amused mastery." In *The Aquarian*, a New York-based music magazine, Kevin Purcell describes his experience at a Game workshop: "One of our first tasks was to walk around the hotel silent, repeating in our heads 'I don't give a fuck what anyone thinks about me.' This mentality, it was assumed, would help lower the wall of anxiety and make us less prone to the pain of rejection. Like soldiers responding to a drill sergeant, when asked 'What are you?' we were instructed to loudly proclaim, 'A fucking ten!'"

Sealing the deal for Darwinists is their quarry's biological clock. The main reason that young educated adults are increasingly marrying in their late twenties and thirties is that women are pursuing education and careers, but ironically, the delay works to men's advantage. Once they get past their awkward late teens and early twenties, men begin to lose their metaphorical baby fat. They're making more money, the pool of available women has grown, and they have more confidence. "I could get a woman now, but when I'm 30 or 35 I could do better," Bryson, an otherwise nice-guy 24-year-old from D.C., tells me.

Darwinist dating may explain the litany of stories you hear from women about the troglodytes in their midst. "We can be slovenly from the start," one interview subject told Amy Cohen in her dating column for the *New York Observer*, "because we can get laid anytime we want." Remember those women who want a guy who will open the car door for them? They may be lucky if they find one willing to add "please" to "Pass the ketchup." Women complain that instead of calling to ask them out, or even make plans for a date, men simply text, "Heading downtown. Where r u?" as they walk to the subway. That may be deliberate. "There is no longer any reason to answer the phone when a woman calls you or return her call when she leaves you a message," insists one dating pro at World of Seduction. "What should you do? Text message, of course." Text messages, he argues, deflect unnecessary personal involvement and keep women on edge. Game goes even further, actually encouraging men to "neg" their "target" women—that is, to undermine their confidence subtly by ignoring or mildly insulting them. The hotter the woman, the more essential it is to neg her.

Indeed, the Darwinists wonder, why pretend we're interested in anything other than sex? Jillian Straus recalls meeting a man at a Hamptons pool party who, early on in their conversation, asked: "So, are you getting any?" One

of Cohen's lessons in contemporary politesse came on a first date with a man who asked her how many guys she had slept with and whether she owned a vibrator.

Darwinian mores, or anti-mores, also explain the brutal status jockeying that pervades the contemporary dating scene and that makes the high school cafeteria look like a feminist utopia. Check out DarwinDating.com, a matchmaking website "created exclusively for beautiful, desirable people." Members rank your picture on a scale of one to five and vote on whether to let you join their honored ranks or throw you into the slush pile of "saggy," "hairy," "sweaty," "nerdy" rejects. My 28-year-old daughter tells me of a friend, a Yale alum and Stanford business school graduate, who asked her, apropos of nothing, "If you ranked women from one to ten, one being Ugly Betty and ten being Elizabeth Hurley, what number could I get?" Jillian Straus describes a 34-year-old sales manager from Dallas who says that his current girlfriend meets just six out of his ten requirements for the perfect girlfriend. When they go out together, he's constantly looking for an "upgrade."

Men are convinced that they are no worse—and probably a good deal better—than women in making these calculations. With good Darwinian logic, though, they believe that women tend to do their reckoning on the basis of wallet size rather than pulchritude. "Girls are really good at that kind of math," one jaded twentysomething man writes to me about his entry-level salary. In a review of the movie *Sex and the City*, the English author Toby Young remembers the five years he had lived in New York: "Attractive single girls not only dropped their 'dates' at the slightest whiff of a bigger, better deal, they routinely betrayed their girlfriends, too." (As his only half-facetious name suggests, Carrie's Mr. Big is pure alpha—rich and, as if proving the conclusions of recovering nice guys everywhere, a bit of a jerk.)

It would be easy enough to write off the dating Darwinists as simple renegades against female empowerment. Easy, but misleading. Menaissance men think that women's equality has brought real benefits, though they might not agree with women about what those benefits are. "We can have sex with as many women as we want and not have to worry about making any of them pregnant," one of my more upbeat respondents, an SYM named Curtis, writes. "Men are having more freedom and fun than ever before in all of history as a result of this, because if there's one thing every single man can agree upon, it's that having sex with as many women as possible is a great thing." Seduction artists even say they prefer savvy women who understand Game as a male version of cleavage-revealing tops. Attracting the opposite sex is, well, a game—an intricate and thrilling game.

Moreover, the Darwinists have not just hard-luck stories on their side, but hard data as well. Forty years after they threw off the feminine mystique, women continue to prefer bigger, stronger, richer men, at least as husbands. They almost always marry men who are taller than they are, men who are several years older than they are (though the age difference has declined in recent decades), and men who earn more than they do (though that number, too, has declined a bit). Most of the women interviewed by Jillian Straus say that they're looking for a man who can be the primary breadwinner. A June 2008 *New Scientist* article reports on two studies that even suggest that women are biologically attracted to "jerks"; researchers speculate that narcissistic, risk-taking men had an evolutionary advantage. Can anyone doubt the reason the gyms swarm with so many guys bench-pressing 250 pounds? Sculpted pecs are to today's SYM what plumage is to the peacock.

No, the problem with the Darwinian tenor of the Menaissance is neither antipathy to women's equality nor a misguided reading of female nature. It is an uncompromising biological determinism that makes no room for human cultivation. We are animals, the new Darwinians seem to say; get used to it. They define manhood as alpha-style toughness and unsentimental promiscuity. And in that spirit, they cultivate manipulation, calculation, and naked (in both the literal and metaphorical sense) self-interest. "Nature doesn't care about hurting people's feelings," explains dating coach Mike Pilinski. "It cares ONLY about reproductive success."

From one vantage point, they are right. Manipulation and self-interest suffused relations between the sexes even

when gentlemen strode the earth; a few pages of Edith Wharton should disabuse any doubters on that score. But human beings rely on culture to tame natural selfishness. After all, we have prohibitions against grabbing a neighbor's steak off the grill or kidnapping his daughter, to give just two examples of behavior about which Nature also doesn't care. For this reason, successful human cultures expect far more of their men than muscle and promiscuity. If Darwinian daters fail to understand this, you can't entirely blame them. They see that when the old dating and courting regime fell, it left a cultural vacuum with no rules for taming or shaming the boors, jerks, and assholes. What do they have to lose?

Nevertheless, you might ask, are there really so many dating Darwinists on the prowl? Is dating really hell, as the website would have it, for the majority of contemporary SYMs and Fs? Probably not. It's a safe bet that for all the confusions and humiliations of dating, most men will still try to be nice guys who say "please" and avoid asking a woman about her sexual history until, say, the third date. And if the past is any guide, most of them, even the most masterly PUAs, will eventually find themselves coaching Little League on weekends. In a national survey of young, heterosexual men, the National Marriage Project, a research organization at Rutgers University, found that the majority of single subjects hoped to marry and have kids someday.

However, it's also a good guess that a significant minority of SYMs are the sort you wouldn't wish on your friends and relatives. Twenty-two percent of the men in the National Marriage Project's survey were "relatively hardcore marriage avoiders," mistrustful of women, and highly skeptical of lifelong commitment. The years they've spent prowling the dating savanna only reinforce their cynicism. Neil Strauss, the author of *The Game*, says that during his PUA years, he saw enough lies and infidelity to make Darwin look like an optimist. "Losing all hope is freedom," snarls the blogger at *Eternal Bachelor*.

In fact, some people would wager that the Darwinian answer to dating chaos is our future normal. "I have lived in many places, countries, and cultures," Douglas Gurney from Montgomery, Alabama, writes. "This is a worldwide phenomenon. The behavior of men is simply a response (which is actually a quite logical one) to the changing behavior of women. Simply put, men are a breeding experiment run by women. You reap what you sow—and when a man can sow all he wants and leave the reaping to others, well, why not?"

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