

The Eros Monster

Breaking free without breaking up

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Intervención sobre William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905)—A Young Girl Defending Herself Against Eros (1880), by Alexis Mata. All artwork © The artist. Courtesy MAIA Contemporary, Mexico City

During the worst romance of my life, I often fantasized about holding a funeral for the relationship. Over time, I worked the fantasy out in detail: I had picked a location and imagined congregating with my loved ones, digging a hole in which I would bury everything he had ever given me—mostly books and letters—saving one volume I still had not read to use as the headstone. I would deliver a eulogy, magnanimously acknowledging the pros alongside the cons of our affair. I got as far as discussing the plan with my friends, who were willing to play along if it meant this hell would end: “Whatever you want, just break up with him already!” And I did, over and over again. I couldn’t *stop* breaking up with him.

We first met during the social hour of an academic conference, in a room crowded with his people. He headed straight toward me and said, “You are just about the only person in this room I don’t know.” I thought to myself, “I am just about the only person in this room I know.” I didn’t say it out loud, not yet aware of how much that sort of playfully literal banter would amuse him, or of how many times this scenario, in which he would flatter me and I would pretend not to succumb, would repeat.

Our last meeting took place four years later, across the street from the public library near his house. It was raining, and he had brought a second umbrella in case I’d forgotten mine; I think he was trying to avoid having to stand close to me. His wife, who knew of me by then, had tried to stop him from leaving the house. He said he feared she would “disown” him if he came to meet me, whatever that meant. “Then why did you come?” I asked. He didn’t have an answer.

When I describe that last meeting, it sounds more like the beginning of something than the end. But that was what our entire relationship was like: always on the verge of getting started. We were in constant contact, exchanging dozens of emails a day, but saw each other in person only thirteen times. It would have been fourteen, but once, on the way to meet him, my train crashed into a truck, and I ended up stuck for many hours in a snowy field.

He was fiercely secretive about us, claiming outsiders couldn’t understand. Plausible enough, since even I, an insider, didn’t. I was always trying to clarify the situation; he was always resisting my efforts. I even proposed to him, though whether you’d call what I was proposing “marriage” depends on your definition: I wasn’t asking him to leave his wife. At first he avoided answering, but I pressed him, again and again. A month later he told me he didn’t want a second wife, or even a second “wife.” Then what did he want? What did I want?

Almost from the beginning, I said I wanted it to be over, but the more we broke up, the less possible it seemed that we could stay that way. He said we had an eternal bond, not realizing how much that sounded like a threat. It got to the point where I couldn’t entertain the funeral fantasy without my mind lurching into a humiliating sequence in which I’d dig everything back up.

Sex without romance, romance without dating, dating without marriage, polyamory, a loosening of gender roles: our world is becoming a Wild West of romantic entanglements. Familial and religious oversight over coupling is dwindling, and the internet makes it

possible to be constantly and privately available to those far beyond our immediate community. We live during a time of great romantic freedom, though we have not yet reckoned with the price. As we eliminate the social norms that guide our expectations of romance, we also liberate a monster within us. The name of that monster is Eros.

It used to be commonplace to characterize romantic attraction as a destructive passion that takes over a person, making them crazily indifferent to their own well-being:

The unreasoning desire that overpowers a person's considered impulse to do right and is driven to take pleasure in beauty, its force reinforced by its kindred desires for beauty in human bodies—this desire, all-conquering in its forceful drive, takes its name from the word for force (*rhōmē*) and is called *eros*.

This definition of love from Plato's *Phaedrus* is several thousand years old; notice how many times the word "force" appears. The *Phaedrus* offers a few speeches inveighing against love before praising a special, divine version of it, one in which erotic madness is sublimated to the shared, sexless pursuit of virtue and knowledge. Hence "platonic friendship." The erotic impulse can fuel the elevation of the soul, but Plato is not shy in confronting how damaging it is when that does not happen. In the dialogue's negative speeches on mundane love, lovers are described as inclined to exploit, demean, and destroy their beloveds, so as to control them more fully.

Plato's student Aristotle did not inherit his teacher's obsession with the dangers of the erotic, and instead focused on *philia*, love expressed through friendship, family, and civic affiliation. Generally, the philosophical tradition has ceded eros to writers of fiction and poetry. In W. Somerset Maugham's bildungsroman *Of Human Bondage*, for instance, Philip's unhappy attraction to Mildred and his willingness to allow her to exploit him is matched only by his contempt for how much she can induce him to debase himself. At one point, she repays his charity by destroying everything he owns. In the final pages of the novel, headed toward marriage with someone he respects and appreciates, Philip thinks he sees Mildred on the street. When it turns out the woman is not Mildred, he is both relieved and horrified:

He felt that a strange, desperate thirst for that vile woman would always linger. That love had caused him so much suffering that he knew he would never, never quite be free of it. Only death could finally assuage his desire.

A century has passed since the publication of this book, and I fear Maugham's contemporary readers may find his descriptions of Philip's romantic torments old-fashioned, hyperbolic, and quaintly exaggerated. While Maugham presents a loveless marriage as Philip's liberation from eros, today we expect marriage to feature—at least at the outset—a great deal of erotic passion. We see such passion as basically salutary,

an essential and positive contribution to adulthood. In this sense, we've done our best to sanitize eros's destructive aspects.

"Eros, honored without reservation and obeyed unconditionally, becomes a demon," warns C. S. Lewis, "mercilessly chaining together two mutual tormentors, each raw all over with the poison of hate-in-love." Writing in 1960, he voices his worry that the dangers of eros have come to be underappreciated: "Read *Anna Karenina*, and do not fancy that such things happen only in Russia." Not only in Russia, and not only in the nineteenth century. In Virgil on Dido, Goethe on Werther, Flaubert on Emma Bovary, Proust on Swann, and Brontë on Heathcliff, we have tales of love as a sickness of the soul.

In these stories, today's reader is drawn to the opposition lovers encounter from the world around them. We are eager to acknowledge the need for ever more acceptance—of nontraditional family structures, of a diversity of sexual preferences, and of romances that cross cultural boundaries. We have become wary of blaming the "force" of eros for the misdeeds to which it gives rise, as this line of reasoning has a bad history of excusing violence, typically against women, as "crimes of passion." Instead, we want to lay the blame at the feet of one of the individuals involved, or point to structural flaws such as gender inequality or age gaps.

It is surely true that romance can exploit existing power imbalances, but the old story was that romance also created these imbalances, delivering one soul for another to prey on. That old story got something uncomfortably right.



Colorful Girl III (detail), by Alexis Mata

Nonetheless, it could use an update. Sometime around our tenth meeting, I tried to write one—a novel detailing the tumultuous history of my own unhappy romance. I wanted to explore the shape the monster takes in a world with few rules left to restrain it. When I was about eighty pages in, he asked me to destroy it. He worried that the details would identify him and threaten his respectability. With deep regrets, I complied. So it was thrilling for me to come across the novels *Willful Disregard* and *Acts of Infidelity* by the Swedish writer Lena Andersson. Romantic pursuit as depicted in contemporary novels and film tends to be short-lived, running dutifully headlong toward the closure of happily ever after or poignant tragedy. Andersson's novels tell my story: the story that is all chase. Here is Ester Nilsson, the protagonist of both novels, in her third year pursuing a man who balances on the knife's edge of love and indifference:

Ester was so used to setbacks that they felt like that old sweater you do the cleaning in. This resignation gave her a cooler and slower, almost forestalled, mien and this shift made Olof more attentive. He became interested when she was resigned. She became resigned when he was uninterested. . . . It was a closed circle.

There is nothing to these novels aside from that inescapable circle, circumnavigated repetitively, monotonously, albeit with two different men. To those of us who have been caught in this cycle, each circuit is riveting. Ester analyzes herself and her predicament incessantly, yet each novel, on its face, could be summed up in a simple cliché: for the aloof Hugo of *Willful*, “he’s just not that into you”; for the married Olof of *Acts*, “he’s never going to leave her.” Hugo isn’t interested in a serious relationship, and Olof already has one.

Yet Ester, like myself, “did not understand.” After she and Hugo first have sex, “Ester was not happy despite the union of their flesh. She did not think he had made his intentions clear. . . . They were strangers to each other.” She spends a year and a half in this limbo with Hugo—three and a half with Olof—waiting for their real relationship to begin.

Like these men, my “Hugolof” responded to retreats with advances, advances with retreats. Like Ester, I was always sure that we were one conversation away from clarifying the situation. Once, before our eighth meeting, I had gotten desperate enough to create a PowerPoint for him about our relationship. One of the slides said, “I cannot go on like this. Please help me.” We sat side by side at a sports bar, facing my laptop. I ordered tea; he ordered nothing. As I clicked through the slides, I noticed that he seemed to be creeping away from me. It reminded me of how, the first time I kissed him—having asked and been granted permission—he stood there paralyzed with fear, trembling, enduring it, waiting for it to be over. You’d think this physical aversion to me would have been an important clue. The problem is that this is exactly how I treated his behavior: as a series of clues. I analyzed, interpreted, and somehow came to read every sign as evidence of its opposite.

It was torture. I rapidly found myself thinking of little else. I fell behind on obligations, forgot appointments, lost weight and sleep; a few months in, I began drinking. About a year in, thoughts of suicide surfaced—was that the only way out? I sought professional help. Therapy, for better and worse, equipped me to deal with the roller coaster, to accept it as my new reality. When I would complain, Hugolof himself would tell me to “just walk away.” The first time I took him up on this, I was rewarded with an explicit declaration of love. That brought me rushing back. Another time I said, “Let’s just not talk for three months,” thinking if I could hold out that long, his allure might fade. But when he got back in touch after three weeks, I was thrilled: he really wanted me! Breaking up became a way of hitting refresh. Every attempt to escape entrapped me further: I could tell him “This is it!” but I never expected him to believe me. I didn’t believe myself.

Sometimes I thought, and said, that I loved him. At other times I hated him to the point that, if I didn’t hear from him for a day, the possibility of his death conjured the tantalizing prospect of relief. It might seem incredible that you can hate the person you claim to love, yet that is exactly what happens when eros becomes a trap. But how did I fall into it? The old story says that eros accesses our emotional vulnerabilities: in Plato’s *Symposium*, Agathon says Eros is soft and delicate, because he makes his home only in the tender regions of the souls of the most soft-hearted people. That doesn’t describe me. Nor does it describe Ester: Andersson paints her as an unusually rational and dispassionate person. What resonates most with me in Andersson’s novels is the theme of confusion, to which she returns again and again:

The worst part of all was not understanding this thing she was in the midst of, this thing that had her in its clutches. There is no pain like the pain of not understanding.

But what makes eros so confusing? Andersson doesn’t explain. When you are obsessed with someone, every detail feels pregnant with meaning. I read and reread his emails. I was always finding new patterns in them. On poster board, I made color-coded calendars recording the lengths of time I was able to stay away from him, when he got back in touch, and when I fell off the wagon. I collected two years’ worth of data regarding the number of emails we exchanged per day and graphed it. I made portentous anagrams of Hugolof’s name, his wife’s, and those of other people in his life who knew nothing about me, but about whom he had told me much. Many years earlier, I had become similarly obsessed with a woman I discovered my then boyfriend—a different Hugolof—was sleeping with. I pathologically lusted after details of her appearance, her past, her career. More than jealous, I was curious—or maybe my jealousy expressed itself as curiosity. I even started reading a novel because its protagonist shared her first name.

We have a word for seeking or seeing patterns of meaning where there aren’t any: *superstition*. My Hungarian relatives would not allow me to sit at the corner of the

table because it meant I would never get married. I was raised not to take pictures of my children sleeping, because closed eyelids signify death. Patterns in animal entrails or dreams or tea leaves or tarot cards have, in various times and places, been read as holding meaning about the future. “He loves me, he loves me not” is an old game endowing the oddness or evenness of a flower’s petals with romantic significance.

Superstitions are often dismissed as irrational, but settled superstitions such as these are beacons of sanity in comparison with the live, ever-changing, turbulent, obsessive madness of active superstitious thinking. Even conspiracy theories have a stable inner core: what was once merely superstitious thinking has solidified into a particular set of beliefs. If a superstition tells you where to look for meaning, then by the same token, it also tells you that you don’t have to look anywhere else. Absent such guidance, any detail could matter, and neither the quest for information nor the project of processing that information encounters a limit. When superstitiousness has been unleashed from the confines of settled superstition, I call that “perpetual thought.”

During the Hugolof years, my usually stable and mild emotions came to fluctuate wildly. I would conjure up tender charity and affection, having, just the moment before, whipped myself into bitter outrage. Superstitious thinking requires a massive investment of energy; the vacillation between hopefulness and despair is what fuels the perpetual thinker’s unending inquiry into what this or that new detail *means*. When everything *out there* is heavy with symbolism crying out for interpretation, one’s inner life becomes saturated with emotion.

These emotions have a distinctive thinness to them: they are intense but pass quickly. Unlike the wrenching grief of losing a loved one or the tender joy of seeing one’s child for the first time, the passions of erotic frustration leave no permanent mark on the soul. Nonetheless, the process of cycling through them, hour after hour, for years, is exhausting and demoralizing: you consume your own psychological resources in order to keep going. In trying to see meaning where there is none, you eat yourself alive.

During my romance with Hugolof, I found myself returning to the winding pathways of Fernando Pessoa’s *The Book of Disquiet*. Pessoa was a lifelong bachelor who is thought to have died a virgin. He had a distaste for romance but an infinite interest in the restlessness of his own mind:

Futile and sensitive, I’m capable of violent and consuming impulses—both good and bad, noble and vile—but never of a sentiment that endures, never of an emotion that continues, entering into the substance of my soul.

It was Pessoa I read for hours on that broken train stopped in the snowy field. “My soul is impatient with itself, as with a bothersome child; its restlessness keeps growing and is forever the same,” he writes. “Everything interests me, but nothing holds me.”

Here was someone as lost as I was. I spent that long winter afternoon feeling more understood by a dead Portuguese introvert than I ever had by my supposed love. At some point the conductors raided the café car and came around distributing food and

water. I kept reading. Pessoa writes: “The cause of my profound sense of incompatibility with others is . . . that most people think with their feelings, whereas I feel with my thoughts.” I thought of all the times Hugolof had told me to relax, to calm down, to be less emotional, to stop escalating. I realized that my feelings, like Pessoa’s, bottom out in thoughts; that if something is rotten or broken in me, it is my mind.

The old story is that eros induces self-destruction by way of emotion: it controls, redirects, and poisons one’s feelings. But eros commits crimes of passion because, first and foremost, it commits crimes of thought. It attacks the heart by way of the mind. Eros is an intellectual monster.



Intervención sobre Admiring Beauty de Guillaume Seignac, by Alexis Mata

Perpetual thinking is, pragmatically speaking, *bad* thinking: the desperate make embarrassingly unreasonable sacrifices on the altar of love. Ester buys a car with the sole aim of occasionally giving Olof rides. I'd end up in a city just when Hugolof happened to be there, and those accidents did not come cheap. A friend said, "It's like a supervillain shot you with a stupidity ray."

I was faced with a problem whose solution—"just walk away!"—was clear to everyone around me. My response was confusion: I did not understand, I felt further investigation was called for, I sought more talk and explanation and interpretation of the multitude of gestures and remarks and details that I was collecting, storing, classifying, and reclassifying. My thinking had become hopelessly infected with superstition: I could not solve the simplest problem, and there was no limit to my furious mental churn.

Utter helplessness is exactly what you'd expect from someone who has handed over a big part of their meaning-making to someone wholly unsuitable for it. Lovers outsource the meaning of their lives to each other; instead of asking themselves, "How should I live?" they ask, "How should we live?" When it works, that kind of mutual devotion can be transcendent, allowing the two to aspire to heights of virtue and happiness impossible for either to achieve on their own. When it doesn't, it's like having your mind hijacked by a master of evasion. "Love" becomes a quest to win back control.

One time I expressed disappointment at how quickly he had to get off the phone; I said I would've liked to talk all day. He said that seemed extreme. He was right; I was always being deliberately, pugnaciously extreme. I asked how long he would've liked to talk for, if he hadn't had another appointment. He said: an hour and forty-seven minutes. His precision was playful, he was joking around, and I knew that—but I wouldn't let it go. I became absurdly literal and demanding. My mind fixated on those 107 minutes; I hounded him about them, he resisted. It was almost a year later, one evening when his wife was out of town, that we finally talked for 107 minutes; the conversation was . . . kind of boring. I didn't mind when it ended. What did I think I would get from those 107 minutes? And why did he make me wait so long for them?

When you put your mind in someone else's hands, you give them leverage that I suppose only a saint could refrain from exploiting. I, like Ester, brought out the worst in the man to whom I'd handed far more power over me than he could handle, and, seeing that, I'd exhausted myself trying to take it back. Every time the train of perpetual thought stopped at some arbitrary station, such as "107 minutes," a new battle was born.

In general, we tend to believe that people seek associations that benefit them. Eros refutes this optimism: sometimes people choose to lock themselves into dyads of exploitative misery. Humans have the potential for a very profound form of openness toward one another's minds—we can come to think as a "we" rather than as an "I." If one party never signs on to, but also never entirely defects from, this collaborative enterprise, the relationship becomes for the other party an infinite loop. This loop is not, at bottom, a matter of passionate attachment, tender affection, or pragmatic

need. The erotic crisis is intellectual: you have lost the ability to think for yourself. You would do anything to get your mind back, if only you could think of a way. Shortly after our twelfth meeting, I reached out to Hugolof's wife. In many stories of eros, the antidote to an obsessive affair is Another Woman, be it the wife or a new lover. I hoped to entice Hugolof's wife into the role of *deus ex machina*. I wasn't informing her of the affair; he had told her five months earlier. Instead I was, implausible as it sounds, envisioning that collaboration might succeed with her where it had failed with him. He so often cited her as the deciding factor—"If she goes to yoga, I can talk" or "She accompanied me on this trip, so I can't meet you"—that I came to regard her as holding all the power. I thought if I could clarify that I didn't want to break them up, she might let him love me too. Or, alternatively, she'd make him leave me alone for good. My overture was received as poorly as my friends had predicted. The relationship continued for another miserable year, though I can't assume my request had no effect: she did object to his meeting me that last time. In retrospect, it's possible that she did as much for me as anyone could have.

But when she turned me down, I hit rock bottom: no one was going to help me out of this pit, ever. Falling in love is invisible to outsiders: your friends and family stand around the pit, obviously insisting that you "just walk away." They can't see how far you've fallen, or that you're stuck down there with a monster. If you try to fight the monster, you just feed it. If you try to run away, you feed it more.

When I envisioned the possibility that Hugolof's wife might refuse to help me, I imagined that she would either reply with furious prohibitions, insults, and anger—or not reply at all. That is not what happened. Her note was short, clichéd, and vacuous; it read like someone trying to sound how they thought a dignified person in their situation would sound. I suppose I was her monster, and she was deciding not to feed me. She didn't fight me, and she didn't ignore me; instead, she was coldly polite. Gradually, I came to realize: the opposite of eros is civility.

If eros drives lovers to construct a private world with its own bespoke set of rules, then conventional decorum offers a public alternative, ready-made. Throughout my life, I have tended to chafe at pressures to conform to societal expectations. But if you find yourself stuck in an enclosed space with someone uncooperative and uncontrollable, you start to see the upside of mindlessly following a set of external rules. When you can't be yourself—when your self isn't anyone worth being—it is a relief to discover the option of being no one in particular. If you stick to doing the done thing, then you can avoid drama, arguments, and breakups. Because breaking up is definitively uncivil. The beauty of civility is that it doesn't matter whether he cooperates, because it is a game you can play solo. My responses to him grew shorter, and I started to build a cocoon of politesse around myself. Inside it, my taste for life started to return. As more of the outside world came back into view, it got easier and easier to back farther and farther away.

Even after he knew I had met someone else, he continued to contact me periodically. And I continued to respond politely. Of course I was tempted to lash out,

either by furiously insisting he never contact me again or by imperiously ignoring him. That would've felt satisfying—but for how long? How long before my faux indifference boomeranged to me as obsession? I had always suspected, and indeed complained, that I was the one supplying the energy that powered our erotic operation. That it could still be so difficult to find the cutoff valve is something Pessoa understood perfectly:

Whenever I've tried to free my life from a set of the circumstances that continuously oppress it, I've been instantly surrounded by other circumstances of the same order, as if the inscrutable web of creation were irrevocably at odds with me. I yank from my neck a hand that was choking me, and I see that my own hand is tied to a noose that fell around my neck when I freed it from the stranger's hand. When I gingerly remove the noose, it's with my own hands that I nearly strangle myself.

Once, after our romance had ended, we found ourselves attending the same lunch. It was a group event, and by the time I found out he'd be there, it was too late to withdraw without risking a scene. Going through the motions of politeness was the only way to avoid making any statement whatsoever. Politeness lets you avoid sending signals; it creates no fodder for a hungry mind. The person who says nothing at all conveys more than the one speaking politely. At the lunch, my attention fell on his eating habits. It was odd, considering how many times we had eaten together, that I had never noticed how gracelessly he wielded his fork, how often he resorted to his fingers. And why did he start eating before everyone had gotten their food?

Five months later, I was away from home, traveling, engrossed in conversation, and suddenly his voice materialized in the air around me. He was standing just outside the door of the room I was in, so close that if I opened the door and reached out a hand, I could have touched him. I thought back to the times when I'd flown across the country to contrive an accidental encounter. I lowered my voice and kept my hand at my side, taking care not to strangle myself.

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