

# GOOD MORNING

Sure they had problems, but so did everyone else.  
Then one day, without warning, he told her he was leaving.  
Years later, she still wonders why.

# GOODBYE

**I**T IS A DAY SUSAN HAS RELIVED A THOUSAND TIMES. Searching for clues, she has obsessively replayed the particulars of every event, the nuances of every word. It is a mystery, a psychological mystery, and while there was no corpse, there was a death of sorts.

"As soon as I got off the airplane, I knew something was wrong," she says. "Richard always met me with flowers whenever we had been apart. This time he wasn't even at the gate."

This was Susan's first clue that her husband of ten years was about to end their relationship. Richard had taken a position with a Chicago medical school and Susan had stayed behind in the Bay Area to sell their house, pack their belongings and quit her own job at a publishing company. They were to rendezvous in New York and then proceed to Chicago to start their new life. But he wasn't there.

"While I was waiting to claim my baggage, he finally ambled up. He limply allowed himself to be hugged, but he wouldn't look at me directly. His behavior was so odd I thought maybe he was ill or temporarily insane."

When she asked him what was wrong, he replied, "We have very serious problems."

And that was it. There was nothing more to talk about, he said, there was nothing she could change. Susan returned to the Bay Area to no house, no job, no husband. Their friends, who had barely recovered from the farewell parties, were astonished.

No one compiles statistics on how many marriages end without warning, but if you raise the topic at any social gathering, you're likely to hear several such stories:

• Ann, 30, and Jim, her husband of six years, had both been accepted to attend graduate school in Michigan. The morning of their departure, their friends had gathered at their small house to say goodbye and to help load their trailer. At one point, Jim left to get a pack of cigarettes at the 7-Eleven a block away. An hour later a friend of his arrived with a note which said, simply, "I want my freedom." He called two days later to let her know he was living in Colorado.

• Tom, 30, a probation officer, came home from work one night to find a terse note from his wife of two years: "I've rented my own apartment. I'll call you when I feel I can talk about it." He knew there were a few kinks in their young marriage, but he had no idea his wife was unhappy enough to leave.

• Julie, 35, an administrative assistant at a Los Angeles college, woke up one Monday morning to hear her architect husband and the father of her two young children say, "I don't know what's wrong, but I've got to get out of here — the walls are closing in on me." Actually, the walls were quite open — the couple was in the middle of adding a second story to the house — a renovation he had designed.

• Karen, 34, is a San Jose physical therapist. She had one of those marriages that friends both envy and resent. Her husband, Bob, a computer salesman, was affectionate, generous, did his share of the household work and was flatteringly attentive. If he was having a conversation with anyone — no matter how important the person or intense the dialogue — Karen needed only to enter the room to capture his complete attention.

One summer day at a Giants game they ran into a work acquaintance of her husband's. He joked about bumping into Bob everywhere he went, including San Diego. This was the first Karen had heard about the San Diego trip and as soon as they got to their seats she asked him about it. "He immediately admitted that he had gone there to see a woman. I felt like someone had just punched me in the stomach. While I was trying to catch my breath, he said, 'Actually, I don't care anything about that relationship, but I have decided that I don't want to be married anymore.'" He moved out that night.

When someone you have lived with and loved suddenly and irrevocably leaves, the experience produces a particular kind of terror. "The prevailing feeling was one of dropping off the edge of a cliff," says Ann. "I felt like I was free-floating and full of fear. I didn't know where I was going to land. I had an overwhelming anxiety about everything in the world."

Because those who have been left behind don't understand their partners' reasons for leaving (none of these leavers could, or

## “Shouldn't starting a relationship include a commitment to end it, if end it must, with some attempt to tie up the loose ends?”

would, say), they tend to blame themselves, and the shock and hurt are compounded by a profound feeling of unworthiness. “When Jim left me I took on the whole blame for the fact that he couldn't tell me he was leaving,” says Ann. “I knew the fact that he couldn't tell me face to face meant that he was afraid. I figured that was my fault.”

“I spent hours and hours trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together,” says Julie. “Over and over I asked myself, *ad nauseam*. ‘Was it because I did this or because I didn't do that? Was it because I wasn't sexy enough or smart enough or athletic enough? Was it because I refused to iron his shirts or pack his lunches? Because my husband wasn't available to help me sort it out, to help explain it to me, I was left on my own to make sense out of it.’”

Tom says his wife's departure caused him to question all of his assumptions about himself and his relationships with other people. “I was wounded and I didn't know how to heal because I was so confused. It's entirely different when you have some preparation and some reasons. I felt like I had done something wrong, but I didn't know what it was.”

For Susan, searching for answers to the questions Richard left in his wake became an obsession, an obsession that perpetuated her mourning and bound her to the relationship. She was not only hurt by his rejection, but demeaned by what appeared to be his indifference. “I felt like a sack of garbage that was discarded by the side of the road.”

**A**LTHOUGH SUDDEN ABANDONMENT has not been systematically researched, therapists who have dealt with the aftermath of such departures say it is denial that usually prevents the one who is left from accurately reading the warning signs. “In all the cases that I know about, the clues were there and they just weren't being admitted,” says Bernard Bloom, a psychologist at the University of Colorado who recently completed a study of divorce and separation.

If they deny problems during the marriage, they certainly don't after it's over. Most of those who are deserted perform scientifically rigorous post-mortems on their relationships. “There were indications, I know that now,” says Ann. “One was Jim's unfaithfulness, which I guess I knew about but didn't want to accept. I didn't ask him any questions. Later, though, I reflected on how he often would say, ‘I'm faithful to you but you aren't to me.’ I couldn't figure out why he kept saying that. Now I'm more sophisticated and I understand about projection. The interesting thing is that 30 minutes after he didn't come home, I knew the guy wasn't ever coming back. So I guess I

knew something was wrong before, but either I was not willing to look at it, or I was afraid to.”

Susan now recognizes that the way Richard treated her was part of a lifelong pattern of instant acceptance followed by instant rejection. (After leaving Susan in New York, Richard almost immediately started living with a secretary he had met only a few days before he and Susan had their airport encounter.) “He was always an all-or-none person. In his mind people were the best or the worst — there was never any in-between. When I first met him he told me he hated his first wife and they had a terrible marriage. At that point I was new and wonderful. After we separated, people who knew him during his first marriage said that he was loving to that wife — that is, until he decided quite suddenly that she was terrible. The pattern was there; I just never expected it to apply to me.”

Tom, after several months of therapy, realized that he and his wife had never established an effective way to communicate dissatisfaction. “We were both afraid to express negative feelings — she even more than I. The only way she knew how to express unhappiness was to leave.”

In retrospect, Julie says she can see that there was trouble in her marriage. “He had been withdrawing from me and the kids more and more. It happened so gradually, I just didn't focus on it.” She also believes her husband, in his own indirect way, tried to tell her how unhappy he was but she didn't want to hear it. “If he criticized our relationship, I would minimize it. I'm an optimistic person and I just don't like to acknowledge problems.”

Denial may explain why a spouse is unable to recognize the symptoms of a deteriorating marriage, but why would someone leave without giving some notice, thereby allowing for some kind of reasonable transition? According to Dr. Lou Rappaport, a family therapist in Marin, such departures are often the result of a panic related to the person's family or origin. “Take a man whose own father lived a life of quiet desperation. He had a troubled marriage, a bad job and eventually died a broken man. One morning the son, now an adult, wakes up and realizes he's been depressed for a while. Terrified, he says to himself, ‘The same thing that happened to Dad is happening to me — I've got to get out.’ So he flees, not only for himself, but also for dear old Dad.”

“Individuals often have unstated conditions under which they will stay together,” says University of Colorado psychologist Bloom. “If the condition is violated, the balance is suddenly tipped and they leave.” One such case was a San Francisco writer who left a marriage after an argument that seemed to his wife to be no worse than others they had. But to him it was. “We had

both been very angry before and we had both said abusive things but this time she attacked my writing. She said that I was crap and my writing was crap. After that, there was nothing more to talk about because my writing is of central importance in my life.”

It is not known whether men are more guilty of “no comment” farewells than women, but it is the impression of some therapists that they are. “Men are generally not very comfortable discussing feelings,” says Bloom, “so if a man really believes he wants to leave, he may not feel that talking will make any difference.”

Such behavior is also a reflection of how hard endings are, even if you are the one headed for the door. Whether mutual or unilateral, terminating a relationship can stir deep-seated emotions that harken back to early childhood separation. Some people leave abruptly, not because they are indifferent but because they are so distressed they want to avoid having to examine their own feelings. Rappaport says both partners are victimized in these cases because the one who flees an unhappy situation without understanding it is often doomed to repeat the same mistakes in the next relationship.

No matter how difficult, it would seem that ending a relationship well is an issue of social responsibility. Shouldn't starting a relationship include a commitment to end it, if end it must, with some attempt to tie up the loose ends?

Some say no. Judith Martin, who writes a nationally syndicated advice column under the name of Miss Manners, recommends that people who want to end a courtship just stop calling. “All a person has to do who wants to walk away from a love affair is walk away. It is surprising how few rejecting lovers understand this. In this day of explanations, it is fashionable for those who no longer love to offer to talk it all over with those whom they no longer love. No worse cruelty ever disguised itself as kindness.”

Perhaps such advice should not be surprising in our disposable society, but people, like bottles, can be recycled — that is, if they are not too damaged along the way.

Studies show that people who lose family members through sudden death suffer longer than those who have time to prepare. The same is true for those who are rejected. Rappaport says when he has clients who want to quit a marriage, he stresses how important it is to leave their mates with some integrity when they go. “That's what people who leave abruptly don't do. Being rejected is always painful, but if there is some understanding, some explanation, it makes a big difference. The spouse may still be left feeling powerless, but it's not the same kind of experience as not knowing what happened.” □