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BLOGS & STORIES

What Was Jennifer's Stalker Thinking?

by *Jacob Bernstein*

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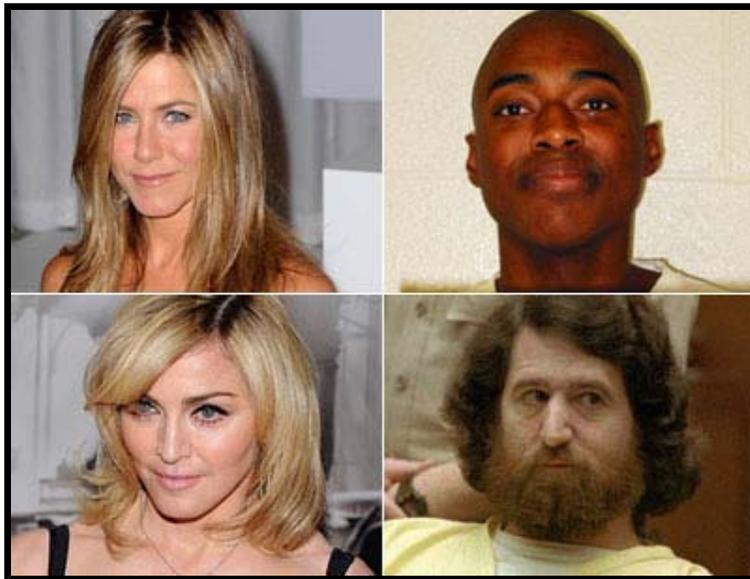
The strangers who pursued Jennifer Aniston and Sandra Bullock appear to have been unable to separate them from the characters they played. Jacob Bernstein on the condition called "erotomania."

Thomas James Weldon, en route to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, checked himself into an emergency room, reportedly saying he was suffering from anxiety and sleeplessness.

Jason Peyton, visiting Los Angeles from Pennsylvania, was found on the Sunset Strip, near a car filled with duct tape, and a sharp object, according to various published reports.

In Wyoming, Weldon is alleged to have told doctors that he was on the way to see a woman he'd been pursuing on and off for the better part of a decade, according to published reports.

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In Los Angeles, Peyton allegedly wrote the object of his affection several love notes, and scrawled messages to her on the side of his car; authorities said he was on a cross-country mission to marry her.

In both cases, the women being pursued had shown no sign of amorous reciprocity toward their pursuers.

The women are Sandra Bullock and Jennifer Aniston, arguably the two most bankable female names in show business. The two men, Peyton and Weldon, who were allegedly in pursuit, appear to be textbook cases of celebrity stalkers, both with extensive histories of mental illness.

Peyton, 24, had been reported missing by his parents, who are said to have told police of his plans involving Aniston.

Weldon, 41, for his part, has been in and out of psychiatric institutions.

What plagues these men?

The consensus among experts interviewed for this article is that the diagnosis accompanying such individuals is "erotomania," a disorder that was first mentioned in medical literature in 1623 by the French physician Jacques Ferrand, who wrote a treatise on this type of "melancholia."

Webster's dictionary defines erotomania as a "psychological disorder marked by the delusional belief that one is the object of another person's love or sexual desire."

"Today, erotomania tends to gravitate around celebrities," said Reid Meloy, author of the book *Stalking, Threatening, and Attacking Public Figures*, adding that studies have shown that would-be stalkers are often particularly transfixed by women who appear regularly on TV, playing emotionally vulnerable working women, not in stable relationships—characters with "strength but also an affectional hunger."

Meloy said that those who suffer from erotomania often suffer from other forms of mental illness such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, and that erotomaniacs are frequently unable to separate the on-screen character from the person playing it. Some times, those obsessed believe that their victim is speaking to them through thin air.

Take for example Dante Siou, who said he heard Gwyneth Paltrow's voice calling out to him from the magazines he found in the grocery store. (In 1998, a judge declared him legally insane).

Or Robert Hoskins, jailed in the 1990s for stalking Madonna—Hoskins believed he was the singer's husband. The first time Hoskins scaled the wall of her L.A. home, he took off his clothes and went skinny dipping in her pool, according to reports. The next time he entered the property, Hoskins struggled with one of her bodyguards, whose gun he tried to grab. Instead, he wound up shot in the abdomen. He also said he was going to slit her throat from ear to ear.

In general, celebrity stalkers are more likely to be men focused on women than the other way around but that is by no means a rule. And same-sex stalkers are not completely unheard of.

Jonathan Norman, who was convicted of stalking Steven Spielberg in 1998, actually brought what former prosecutor Rhonda Saunders describes as a "rape kit" when he showed up at the director's Los Angeles home, according to reports. It included duct tape, handcuffs, a razor blade knife, chloroform, and some sort of mask, and Norman later said that Spielberg was the primary physical target of his plot, not the director's wife. Like Siou hearing Paltrow's voice, Norman claimed he had heard Spielberg's voice calling.

"If they stop, it's generally because they focus on another victim," said Saunders, who prosecuted the cases against Hoskins and Siou. She is worried now that budget cuts have done away with the law-enforcement unit in L.A. that focused on stalking. "Before, we had four attorneys working these cases, two investigators, and victims' advocate. We had a specialized force. Now, it's been scaled down. There isn't even a dedicated investigator."

If there's any silver lining for the red-carpet set, it's that while some of these stalkers may be fairly "smart" in the scheming department, they can be remarkably obtuse with respect to the trans-Atlantic travel plans of their would-be victims. Norman's grand attempt took place when Spielberg was off in Europe filming *Saving Private Ryan*, Meloy says.

As for Jason Peyton, at the time he was found wandering down Sunset Boulevard, asking people to help him find his

future "wife" Jennifer Aniston, she was in London, launching a perfume.

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