

SEX/diary

Waiting for the L Word

Jill, 26, editor, New York City

FRIDAY 11 a.m., work: My boyfriend has just signed on to G-chat; we discuss plans to go upstate tomorrow for the weekend. I'm hoping it'll be the romantic kick he needs to finally drop the L bomb. We've been together five months, and I'm troubled by his reticence.

SATURDAY 5 p.m., B&B: We arrive at the inn. I am in Victorian heaven.
6 p.m., our room: After a quick dip in the lake before sundown, we return for immediate bathing-suit removal.

10 p.m.: Following a lovely dinner, we're rocking on the porch swing, under the stars. We kiss. We stare into each other's eyes. "I love you," I say. Pause. "What's the murder rate like up here, you think?" he responds. No kidding.

11 p.m.: In bed, reading. I'm huffy. This is probably the fifth or sixth time I've said The Word, and he's never said it back. When I've asked him about it before, he has promised he can't say it to anybody and it has nothing to do with me, but I can't help feeling rejected.

SUNDAY 12 p.m., beach: After breakfast, we do a crossword. Then he drags me into the lake, bear-hugs me, and dunks me under water. I'm ridiculously happy, and I can tell he is, too.

11 p.m., car: I'm sleepy while heading back to the B&B from a drive-in movie and frustrated that he can't help with the driving (would it kill him to get a license?). But more frustrating is that I can't tell him how I feel without getting silence in return. He rubs my leg and reads to me from a magazine. He's so great; why is this the one thing he can't do?

MONDAY 8 a.m., B&B: We only have this room for three more hours, so we skip breakfast and take advantage of it.

5 p.m., car: Almost home when he gets a call on his cell. It's his mom, inviting us to dinner tonight. I've met her a couple of times, and his constant willingness to include me in family stuff is promising.

11:40 p.m., home: After dinner at his mom's, I drop him off and go home. He IMs me: "You have fun this weekend?" "Totally," I say, which is true, despite not hearing the one thing I wanted to hear. "You?" I ask. "Obviously! :-)" I go to bed wondering how a man so afraid of feelings can be so liberal with emoticons. But I guess, for the time being, I'm OK with a relationship where actions speak louder than words.



BORN TO CHEAT

If your father slept around, are you genetically doomed to do the same? By Danielle Pergament

DURING THE WINTER before my wedding, I was on assignment in Sicily, where I met Diego—a photojournalist with black hair, a scruffy beard, and warm brown eyes that could liquefy concrete. He was my guide in Palermo, driving me around the city on his motorcycle. On my last day, as we stood in a bombed-out cathedral—him talking about World War II, me trying to focus on his words—he started inching closer. Another inch. Then a fraction more, and he was in my personal space. The slightest gesture from me would have been an invitation. I froze. I was madly in love with my fiancé, so what the hell was I doing?

The desire to cheat is hardly a new emotion for me. In fact, I can fairly say that if you've dated me, there's a pretty good chance I was unfaithful. (*I'm really*

sorry!) You might even call me a natural-born cheater—and I think I get it from my father.

Henry Pergament was a businessman, entrepreneur, and chemistry genius. By the time I was born, he'd raised several fortunes and had two families and half a dozen children in and out of wedlock. I have memories from my childhood that I wish I didn't: One night when I was about 10, I was at dinner with my sister, my father, and his friend Mike. I overheard my dad say, "What have I been up to? What men are up to when they're not with their wives."

Daily life in my family found my sisters, my mother, and me running around the house like it was a disrupted anthill, my father somewhere offscreen. He worked hard and was often in >>

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absentia. But as I started to understand the adult world in increments, I wondered: Was he with another woman when he could be home teaching me to take a picture/drive a stick shift/make potato pancakes?

In the fall of 1991, I flew back to boarding school in California from our home in New York; my father had driven me to the airport. Once at my dorm, I called home, and my mother sounded strange on the phone: "Your father never came home." He'd hugged me at the United terminal, then gotten in his car and driven all the way to Arizona, to his mistress. I remember thinking, How could he not tell me he wasn't coming back?

But then he did come back. A few months later, he showed up at my graduation—tan, fit, wearing a linen suit, his white hair longer than I'd ever seen it. I never spoke to him about his family sabbatical.

My father died 10 years ago, and to be fair, he was a great deal more than his infidelities. He had a Dickensian childhood—was raised in an orphanage, knew only poverty, never dreamed of going to college. He was highly intelligent (he invented film-processing systems that revolutionized photography), generous, and so handsome that Catherine Deneuve flirted with him and Audrey Hepburn tried to buy him a drink. (He declined; I never learned why.) I take after my father in many ways—I got his dark eyes, his hot temper, his taste for burned toast. And I understand why he cheated: There wasn't enough love in the world to make up for what he'd missed as a child. I just wish I wasn't doomed to repeat it.

The first time I strayed—I messed around on one high-school boyfriend with the next one—I called it "overlap." By college, I was overlapping all the time. My sister called me "boy crazy." Once, when I con-

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fided to my mother that I was torn between Peter and Matt, she barely contained her disapproval. "You have your father's sex drive," she said. Ouch, I thought. But, then, a second later: Could this be a genealogical pattern? What happens when the right person comes along?

I got married nearly two years ago to exactly the right person. I fell in love immediately and—*cringe*—told him so on—*cringe, flinch, recoil*—our second date. On our wedding day, I missed my dad terribly, like any fatherless bride, but something else was bugging me: Would I be able to respect marriage in a way that my father never could?

The other night at a dinner party, I posed a question to the table: "Could there be a gene for infidelity?" I asked. "No," said my doctor friend Michael through a mouthful of pasta. There is no coil in DNA that makes a person cheat. Period. But surely not all of our proclivities are learned, I said. Some of us are born loving public speaking or being great at languages—it just takes a few years to know it. So what if there is a libido gene? And a gene for impulsiveness? And what if a person has both?

"Sounds like an excuse," replied Michael.

Who knows why people cheat—too little attention, too much attention, fear, boredom? For me, it's always been the excitement principle—the promise of being naked with someone new, the physical draw and the universe willing me to lean in.

When you consider the counterforce, the prissy and principled *I'm not going to do that*, it doesn't seem like a fair fight. But so far it works—fidelity always wins.

I never did kiss Diego, back in the ruins of Palermo. Sure, I wanted to, but it seemed small, childish. Too easy.

And now I have a strategy for ducking temptation. No, I don't imagine my husband's loving face. The notion of telling myself it's not worth it, don't throw it all away, blah, blah, blah, doesn't work for me. Instead, every time I sense it could happen, every moment I find myself attracted to someone and crossing into too flirty, I tell my husband. Because once I confess to him my lust for the hot bartender at the tapas place, I lose interest. Of course, copping to even a potential infidelity is not the most pleasant conversation—when I told my husband about Diego, he was understandably pissed. But then two things happened: He and I became closer, and Diego lost his sheen.

If there's such a thing as a cheating gene, it's not the same as attached earlobes—it predisposes us to a possibility, not a certainty. I'll know when I want to cheat, and because of my take-it-like-cough-medicine method, my husband will, too. I can vacuum the mystery right out of it and make my marriage stronger in the process. Maybe infidelity wasn't the only gene I got from my father—maybe, if I'm lucky, I got his fortitude as well. **mc**



Danielle Pergament wrote about Iraqi women forced into prostitution for the August '08 issue of *Marie Claire*. She lives with her husband in New York.

