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of LOVE AFFAIRS

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MANNERS & MISDEMEANORS



RELATIONSHIPS

PUBLIC AFFAIRS

The all-too-familiar—and often broadcast—cheater's lament deserves a retirement party.

BY MARCIA DE SANCTIS

DESPITE THE PURITAN MORALITY THAT IS OUR birthright and our curse, we Americans get awfully giddy when our public figures are revealed to be as ordinary and confused as the rest of us when it comes to sex and marriage. So it is with our usual voraciousness that we tear into every morsel of news surrounding General David Petraeus's affair with his biographer, Paula Broadwell. As this goes to press, one hopes the ex-CIA director is on bended knee in private with Holly, his wife of 37 years; there will be a mighty storehouse of hammers and nails needed to rebuild that fractured trust. To the rest of us he offered but a paragraph—a curt resignation statement. Though the spectacle that followed was far from dignified, at least he spared us the press conference mea culpa with the missus gazing out in shock, her every wince documented for eternity.

Perhaps we should use this occasion to call for a moratorium on all the confessions—camera-ready and otherwise—made by our cheating athletes, politicians, and movie stars with such regularity. Maybe it's time their crisis handlers yanked them offstage, away from judgment and ridicule during what is a personal, family trauma. These episodes are unsavory occasions for voyeurism, and an apology adds nothing except a warm tingle of sanctimony for those who chase the adulterers with torches and pitchforks.

When Kristen Stewart was busted by a photographer's long lens stepping out on Robert Pattinson, Twi-hards went berserk on the 22-year-old actress. The collective heart rallied to the mortified cuckold, whose public persona shifted overnight from stud to object of pity. Her remorse for what she called a "momentary indiscretion" with Rupert Sanders, the 41-year-old married director of *Snow White and the Huntsman*, was palpable. "This has jeopardized the most important thing in my life, the person I love and respect the most, Rob," read her statement, proffered in *People*. "I love him, I love him, I'm so sorry." Stewart's apology indulged her fans' appetite for contrition, as if they, not Pattinson, had been betrayed. I would have liked to see her withhold the public breast-beating, to defy the fans, to stand fast and weather the knocks in silence, with the assurance that time and hard work would repair her reputation, as it did in the 1950s, when the married Ingrid Bergman fell hard for the also married director Roberto Rossellini.

Love affairs are older than dirt. They are in the Bible, Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Flaubert, and all over Graham Greene. From politics and showbiz, where morality is hardly part of the required skill set, what do we expect? Sexual escapades are de rigueur (and quite possibly one of the perks of the job). Think Elizabeth Taylor, Mick Jagger, John Lennon, Michael Jordan, and LBJ. Their alleged wanderings caused collateral damage to their spouses and families, but not to the public. My scandal-weary self misses the blind eye we once turned to the sheer, predictable train wrecks that are some of our public figures' private lives. We didn't know who was screwing whom or why, and if we did we didn't much care.

There is perhaps no more virulent form of public scorn than the kind heaped upon the openly unfaithful. I discovered this, albeit to a far lesser degree, a few years ago, when I published a story about my own semi-adulterous experience in an almost-affair. Some of the questions that followed were not "Why did you fall in love with another man?" but rather "Why did you write about it?" I didn't apologize for my actions; instead I attempted to offer an honest portrait of marriage: As long as it consists of two flawed human beings, it will inevitably be tested by time, circumstances, and, yes, someone else who tempts you beyond all reason. I don't encourage infidelity—far from it—but the bloodlust that trails a high-profile affair disclosure often serves only to reinforce an

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unrealistic view of marriage as immutable and immune to the pangs of simple human hunger. We might actually evolve as a society, and better comprehend relationships in these long lives of ours, if public figures simply refused to overshare their failings and regrets. The shaming that ensues brings us back to square one in the great scandal cycle and primes us for another surefire disappointment: that marriage can't and won't live up to the standards we keep on setting.

Sex scandals have become a spectator sport we all follow and bet on, but it's one in which we all root for the same side, however unfairly. We all waved our Team Silda Wall Spitzer/Huma Abedin/Elizabeth Edwards/Jenny Sanford pennants in solidarity against those philandering husbands of theirs. Infidelity is about as one-sided a subject as exists in the world, end of story, right? That certainly is the case when the details unfold

can instantaneously ruin someone's life. The public clamored for a remorseful Tiger Woods, but didn't we feel icky the morning after? A narcissistically hypersexual golfer owes us nothing.

Normally, those who disclose their affairs do so to the great embarrassment of their partners—or so we assume, because we empathize with their humiliation and absorb their disgrace, as if it were happening to us. It's hard to find a tender spot for these cads (especially Eliot Spitzer, who would have gone to jail if hypocrisy were a crime), but the apology simplifies a surely nuanced example of human frailty, reducing it to a hero (cheated upon) and villain (cheater). Marriage is never so prescribed. When they apologize before the world or write about it in a tell-all (hello, Arnold) to contextualize these complexities, they look even worse.

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on CNN as the guilt-riddled party atones, providing a news clip of one couple's private pain to be played and replayed until the last obituary is aired.

Nothing quite ups the tawdry factor in an already seamy situation than these ritual apologies. Governor Sanford lies his way out of disappearing to Argentina with his lover on state time and treasure. Governor Schwarzenegger is confronted by a tsunami of rumors about the 14-year-old son of a former housekeeper. Private photos of Representative Anthony Weiner's genitals get leaked to a conservative blogger. In all these cases, the subsequent apologies exacerbated the agony and the sleaze by giving late night comics, editorial writers, and the rest of us more to mock and eviscerate.

The disclosure also shines a bare lightbulb on the flagrancy (and, in some cases, stupidity) of the unfaithful. It says, unequivocally, *I got caught*. Even though most humans can keep a secret, Gmail servers, IP addresses, and some Vegas waitresses cannot. An enterprising photographer may be skulking nearby; a tweet-happy bystander

And yet, for every celebrity adultery story, there are very likely a zillion more that stay hidden under the covers, relationships between consenting adults that don't involve heartbreak, love children, or TMZ. And sometimes we accept them and they blow over anyway. Just about every Kennedy delighted in adulterous hookups while in office, and girls on the side have followed President Clinton from Little Rock to this day, tarnishing his reputation but not his legacy. Rumors of extramarital liaisons have trailed David Beckham, Matt Lauer, and Carla Bruni, but their refreshing silence made those stories evaporate into the ether.

Relationships are complex, evolving, and unpredictable equations. And sometimes a man or woman falls in love with someone else, and there is tumult and sorrow, and a couple make the difficult decision to end their marriage. That is reality. But our public figures need to seek absolution only from the people they love and those they have hurt. Why should we add to the noise? They don't need a jeering chorus. The sound of someone tumbling from a great height is loud enough. •

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