

How (not) to Cheat

by Lavinia Ludlow

I've cheated on exactly 40% of my partners. Depending on how well you know or think/assume you know me, that could be a shitload or a few minor transgressions.

Although I've never thought about cheating as wrong or something that would send me to eternal damnation in my own agonistic hell, I fully recognized that my decisive actions were **hurting** someone and forever changing our course of intimacy, whether or not he ever found out. They say sobriety starts (and restarts) on day 1, meaning there are a shitload of times you can hit the reset button before you really start pissing people off and testing their faith, but faith in monogamy is shattered on day 1.

There was never any common reason why I strayed either, sometimes it was boredom, revenge, or I wanted to be with someone else before I pulled up my big girl panties and broke up with my current partner. In conversations with friends, family, and fleeting acquaintances, I've found that their dissatisfaction with their partners was directly correlated with their entitlement or drive to cheat.

He/she neglected and drove me into the bed of another person.

He/she always chose his/her friends/mother/ex-husband/ex-wife/kid(s) over me.

He/she did it first.

He/she was an asshole.

He/she was just too different from me.

I can identify with all of these since the degree at which a partner was incompatible with (or an asshole to) me was directly correlated to how guilty I didn't feel when I cheated on him. I am also human, and it's human nature to take any internal dissonance and spread it thin over a massive rationalization until it vanishes. However, I'm honest enough to know that fucking around has never been accidental or unplanned. Every time I did it, even in the rock bottom

throes of esteem, sobriety, and life, yes, even on the brink of suicide, I knew exactly what I was doing.

I've also never cheated to accomplish something, and I adamantly refuse to believe the act is a debatable moral dilemma. Ashley Madison's CEO said, "The majority of people who have an affair use it as a marriage preservation device." To me, this is comparing infidelity to stealing bread to feed a starving child. Steal or starve. Cheat or break up. Fucking around behind a monogamous partner's back is a fucked up shitty thing to do and it makes people feel like shit.

Naturally, I haven't been without a fair share of unfaithful partners (I wouldn't be surprised if there were more that I never knew about), and discovering it was never an earth-shattering, life-destroying revelation that plagued me with intimacy issues (life's done that on its own). As I got older, being cheated on is something I understood that came with the territory—dine out at gas station coffee shops enough, and you're going to eventually find a bug, Band-Aid, or fingernail in your food.

But I have recently been **hurt**. Bad.

And this wasn't a, "I accidentally pumped my dick in and out of a rando last night, and I only came once and it was weak because I was drunk and she was fugly" scenario. This endearingly short, imperfect but authentic, whip-smart-ass who could serve me a helping of tough criticism with a dollop of tenderness, and is still the only person I'd ever wanted to serve and be served by, to colonize and be colonized by, whose arms I could lie in forever, helpless, smitten, and stripped of my sharp edges and bitterness, revealed that he had been cheating on me. With his wife. With whom he had a three-year-old son.

Oh yeah, that was a three hundred and sixty degree sucker punch. I felt the foundation and structural skeleton of my new life annihilated as if a demolition team had spent the last year laying dynamite that would cut me to my knees and leave me a pathetic pile of "other woman" rubble in a foreign country. In that moment,

everything about us ceased to exist. The conversations we had, the promises we made, the sheets we soiled, were utterly fraudulent.

When I was ready to talk about it, a friend tried comforting me with, "We're not meant to be monogamous, especially guys. Maybe we should all be polyamorous." She, however, believed polyamory was just another way of saying open relationship. As I understand polyamory, multiple people enter a commitment to each other, which doubles (or triples) the chances of hurting someone or getting hurt, not to mention dealing with the exponential rise in modern relationship complexity and drama. "How many times do I have to repeat that I have a headache tonight? Which one of you fuckers left the toilet seat up? You're all sleeping on the couch!" Or worse, I'm on the couch while the rest of them are canoodling in the bedroom without me.

I'd like to be able to pass on my lessons learned like, "what goes around, comes around" ; "don't be a (man)whore" ; "don't get too comfortable" ; "forgive and forget" ; "nothing lasts forever" ; "no relationship is perfect," or "life's going to fuck you one way other another, whether cancer, lawsuit, or infidelity," but I have nothing. The only understanding I carry forward is that I once wholly and unapologetically devoted myself to someone, and I had negative desire to stray. During that finite amount of time, I became the best version of myself, and therefore, the best partner I would ever be for someone. That's the best any of us can do for ourselves, and the most we can hope to find in another.

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