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SAVAGE LOVE



SCENES FROM
A MARRIAGE

BY DAN SAVAGE

My wife and I have been married for 14 years and in a committed (I assumed) relationship for 17 years. Sex between us (often kinky) has always been great. We have a wonderful life together and two perfect children. I thought we were good; turns out things were too good to be true. I learned recently that my wife has been unfaithful to me throughout our marriage. She began an affair with an older man soon before we were married, and they were physically intimate for five years, including bondage and a Master/sub relationship. The physical sex stopped, but phone sex and online flirting continued up until I discovered this two weeks ago. This is a man I know. She has introduced our children to him. There's more: She slept with another man (just once, more bondage) but also flirted with him online and met up with him while I was away. She slept with yet another man she works with (just once, vanilla this time). She had phone sex with at least two other men and flirted with still more on Facebook. This came out because I was jealous about something that now seems minor and checked her e-mail. (Not proud of that.) She is repentant and relieved that I finally know, and she promises that she will be faithful from now on. I'll always love her, and I know she loves me. We had one session with a counselor and another is scheduled. Results were mixed. One thing that came out was that she has never been faithful to a romantic/sexual partner. I could forgive a one-time drunken fling, but this is a consistent pattern of infidelity that runs from the beginning of our marriage, and I had no idea. I cannot process it. I thought she had always been as loyal as I've been, which is to say completely. I can't put my wedding ring on—it feels like a lie. I have no one to talk to. For the sake of our future, the love we still share, and our children, we are committed to fixing things, but we're not sure how.

Heartbroken And Devastated

I'm going to preface my response with what someone in my position is expected to say and what, given the circumstances, may even be true: Your marriage is over. The scale, duration, and psychological cruelty of your wife's betrayals may be too great for you to overcome.

But you didn't need me to tell you that, HAD. You knew that already. So I can only assume you wrote wanting to hear something else. You don't need me to outline the reasons you should leave, and you don't need my permission to go. You wrote because you're looking for a reason to stay.

I'll give it my best shot.

A long-term relationship is a myth two people create together. It's not chemistry, it's not math, it's not engineering. It's a story, HAD, a story we tell each other, a story we tell others, and a story we tell ourselves.

And sometimes it's a story we have to revise.

Right now, it feels like the story you've been telling yourself and others about your marriage is a lie: not partly, but wholly. You thought your marriage was a loving, committed, and "completely loyal" one, but it's not—it can't be, and it never was, because she was cheating on you from the beginning.

But loyalty isn't something we demonstrate with our genitals alone. Your wife wasn't loyal to you sexually, HAD, and that's painful. And the conventional "wisdom" is that people don't cheat on partners they love. But you were married to this woman, and you describe your marriage as good, loving, and wonderful. And it somehow managed to be all those things despite your wife's betrayals. She must have been loyal to you in other ways or you would've divorced her long before you discovered her infidelities. Think back over the last 17 years: every kind and loving gesture, every considerate action, every intimacy, every moment you took care of each other—was it all a lie?

I'm not trying to exonerate your wife, and I'm not trying to minimize her betrayal or your pain. But if you want to stay together, HAD, you're going to have to tell yourself a new story, one that makes room for contradiction (loves you, cheated on you), betrayal (shitloads), apologies (shitloads from her), forgiveness (shitloads from you), and... some accommodations going forward. If I may paraphrase Maya Angelou: When someone finally shows you who they are—after you found the incriminating e-mails—you should believe them. Your wife has never been faithful to you or to anyone else, HAD, at least not sexually. Adjusting your expectations and making accommodations accordingly is more realistic than expecting your wife to become a different person.

Finally, HAD, a little bonus advice. I ran into Esther Perel, author of *Mating in Captivity: Unlocking Erotic Intelligence*, the day your letter arrived. Perel is a psychotherapist and couples counselor whose most recent TED Talk ("Rethinking Infidelity") is one you're going to want to watch. I shared your letter with Perel and asked her what she thought: Based on her vast experience working with couples confronting infidelity, did she think your marriage was doomed?

"No, I don't," said Perel.

Perel's response honestly surprised me. We spoke for 10 minutes, and I recorded the conversation. It won't fit in this space—so I'm going to post Perel's thoughts as the Savage Love Letter of the Day when this column comes out. So you're going to get a second opinion from an actual expert, HAD, and—spoiler alert—it's a hopeful one.

I'm a cis woman in my late 20s. About three months ago, I had my first one-night stand. I've noticed my thoughts have continued to gravitate toward this man ever since—despite having other sexual partners in the interim. I recently ran across his profile on Tinder—however, I'm fairly sure he hasn't logged on for a while as certain things weren't up to date. While I obviously swiped right, I'm curious as to whether it would be seen as inappropriate or possibly invasive if I were to reach out via the powers of social media. The night we had went well—it was all incredibly comfortable sexually, and I found him very interesting to talk to both before and after we hooked up. I should mention that I left rather swiftly that evening without grabbing his number in an attempt to "play it cool." I definitely don't want to cross social or personal boundaries, but I'd like to see him again.

Creep

There's nothing creepy about letting someone you fucked know you wanna fuck 'em again or, hey, maybe even date 'em for a while. It gets creepy only if they don't respond, or if they politely decline, and you keep letting them know you would like to fuck/date them some more.

You liked him, you had a nice time, the sex was good—and you left, stupidly, without his number for fear of looking clingy or uncool. Social media has come with costs—trolls, bullying, Donald Trump's Twitter feed—but the ability to locate someone and ask for a do-over/screw-over is one of the benefits. So look him up on Facebook or Instagram and send him a note. If you don't hear back, consider yourself swiped left and move on.

On the Lovecast, the devastatingly hilarious comedian Emily Galati: savagelovecast.com.