lust in translation

THE RULES OF INFIDELITY FROM TOKYO TO TENNESSEE

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slices of watermelon. I slide into one of the soft chairs. A girl in pink jodhpurs approaches me and begins rubbing my temples (a “foot” massage starts with the head here). My thoughts of Winnie, and of catching hepatitis, ebb away. I wonder if I can buy another massage after this one. And I’m thinking I might come back to Shenzhen.

CONCLUSION

home sweet home

After wandering around the world to see how people cheat, I’m finally back at my desk in Paris. My world ranking of adultery is pinned to the wall next to me, like a talisman. It gives me the illusion that I have a handle on this vast, slippery, and possibly unknowable topic.

I’ve discovered that some of the stereotypes Americans hold about foreigners are wildly outdated. I’d always heard that Italian men are world-class philanderers. In fact, they commit less adultery than American men—which is to say, they don’t cheat very much. That stereotype about Italians may have contained some truth between 1880 and 1920, when millions of Italians emigrated to America and brought their stories about Italy with them. But it’s not true of modern Italy.

Many such stereotypes endure from other eras. I grew up hearing about fog in London; in fact, it was smog, which was all
but eradicated by Britain’s Clean Air Act of 1956. American soldiers returned from World War II with tales of Frenchwomen who didn’t shave their armpits and hid their body odor with copious amounts of perfume. Stories of French promiscuity had been legion for centuries. In fact, Paris is now home to some of the cleanest and best-epilated women in the world. And contemporary Frenchmen cheat about as much as Americans.

We Americans even cling to false notions about ourselves. Americans persist in believing dubious statistics from the 1940s and 1950s suggesting that cheating is very prevalent. Some Americans even take a sly satisfaction in the idea that women now manage to schedule extramarital trysts in between their sales presentations and parent-teacher conferences. This is taken as evidence of increasing equality between the sexes.

In fact, as I learned, Americans don’t cheat much. In 2004, just 16 percent said they had ever been unfaithful to a spouse, and only 3.5 percent said they’d cheated in the last year. There’s no firm evidence that more women are cheating now, despite the fact that more go to work. Sex statistics surely aren’t a perfect representation of how people behave, but it’s telling that the levels of infidelity in America have remained fairly steady through the last eleven national surveys, conducted over a period of sixteen years.

Although Americans believe that cheating is common, our expectations of marriage have risen so much that we have trouble believing our own spouse would ever be unfaithful. When we discover that a partner has strayed, it’s so world-shattering that we head into a kind of post-traumatic stupor. This comes with its own contradictions. I get the sense that Americans sometimes take a certain satisfaction in all the drama that affairs create. Being a “betrayed spouse” is an identity and, for some, even a vocation.

Americans weren’t always so willfully naive about affairs. Women of my grandmother’s generation didn’t usually fret about whether their marriages were personally fulfilling or not. But since it became much easier to divorce in the 1960s, we’ve been holding our marriages—and our lives—to an extremely high standard. We strive for perfect health and fitness, and we expect emotionally satisfying marriages and complete fidelity.

In America, marriage is even supposed to resolve one’s existential angst. A married person doesn’t have to worry whether she’s fundamentally alone and unknowable. She’s married. There’s at least one person with whom she has no barriers and no secrets. Religious Americans invoke the biblical expression that they and their spouses are “one flesh.” Though previous generations may have been more sanguine about the challenges of monogamy, nowadays any slip is—at least theoretically—grounds for divorce. Adultery robs us of the happy ending that we believe—despite all the evidence to the contrary—is our due.

This outsize preoccupation with monogamy doesn’t seem to do Americans much good. We cheat in roughly the same proportion as many of those foreigners who are calmer about infidelity. Our high expectations for personal happiness might even make us more likely to cheat. After all, aren’t we entitled to an affair, if that’s what it takes to be fulfilled?
When Americans do cheat, it gets very messy. Despite the existence of our vast marriage-industrial complex, adultery crises in America last longer, cost more, and seem to inflict more emotional torture than they do in anyplace else I visited. The discovery of an affair is so calamitous that on adultery Web sites people use war terminology to describe it: D-day. Polls show that Americans who have cheated are less likely to describe themselves as “very happy” than those who haven’t (although it’s not clear if infidelity is the cause or the effect).

Americans are such poor cheaters that we’re even prone to suffer during the act of extramarital sex. I didn’t find any other country whose citizens get naked with their lovers but specifically don’t have intercourse, so that they can semitruthfully tell themselves and their spouses that they didn’t have sex. There’s almost certainly no other country where adulterers routinely insist that they’re not the cheating type. What’s the point of having a secret love affair if you’re going to spend most of it feeling guilty? And then, if you’re discovered and you stay married, you face years of recriminations from your spouse, during which you may be called upon to create a time line of every anxiety-filled caress you exchanged with your lover. Divorce might come as a relief after that.

In America, affairs can escalate even if neither party really wants them to. Extramarital relationships are so stigmatized that lovers prefer to treat the affair as a relationship that is socially acceptable: a courtship that leads to marriage. An “other woman” who’s single is almost obliged to aspire to the more respected role of “wife.” I heard about people who left their marriages to be with their affair partners just so they wouldn’t feel like such creeps.

One husband in his early forties was so eager to distance himself from his own behavior that he described entering an affair with a coworker as almost involuntary. “I actually really enjoyed just kind of talking with her; I didn’t really want the relationship to move beyond where it was.” The husband told me he didn’t envision his weekly lunches with the woman moving into what he now calls, with distaste, “this sexual thing.” Things escalated anyway. He didn’t tell his wife when he and the woman went to a basketball game together, and then when they went for a stroll around the city.

His account of what happened next was fragmented and dreamlike. “She said, ‘You know, we could get a room here,’ and I just thought, ‘Whoa, that’s really scaring me.” I said, ‘No,’ and I really kind of declined the first few invitations for that sort of stuff. And then in reality she kind of wore me down. I really didn’t want to, because, you know … whatever.” When he got to the part about how he’s really not the cheating type, I wanted to sock him.

Some Americans even have trouble admitting that adultery is appealing. Their advice is, “If you want to cheat, just get a divorce.” What this doesn’t acknowledge is that affairs can be exciting precisely because one is married. Sometimes we want to be bound and free. An affair has all the pleasure of an intense courtship without any of the anxiety about how it’s going to end. In fact, the ending has already happened, but with someone else (the spouse).
Life isn’t as neat as many Americans wish it would be. In Isaac Bashevis Singer’s novel *Enemies, a Love Story*, the main character, a Polish-Jewish immigrant to America, grapples with three different women. He gets little sympathy from anyone in his adopted country. “American lawyers had simple solutions for everything: ‘Which one do you love? Divorce the other one. End the affair. Find a job. Go to a psychoanalyst.”

Though the juggling act is running him ragged, he can’t bear to give up any of the women. “I want to have all three, that’s the shameful truth,” he admitted to himself. ‘Tamara’s become prettier, calmer, more interesting. She’s suffered an even worse hell than Masha. Divorcing her would mean driving her to other men. As for love, these professionals used the word as if it were capable of clear definition—when no one had yet discovered its true meaning.”

These days monogamy is the ideal almost everywhere, and people in wealthy, Western countries usually don’t stray very much. But outside America, they tend to accept that it’s normal for married people to have little crushes and attractions, and to sometimes act on these feelings. When they do, it doesn’t automatically mean that the married couple has been, in the American parlance, living a lie for years. Adultery brings heartache everywhere, but context and expectations determine the strength of the heartache.

Perhaps we could take a lesson from the French. In general, when they have an affair, they give themselves permission to enjoy it. They plan nice meals, find romantic settings, and don’t beat themselves up about what they’re doing. And if they don’t want the affair to escalate, it doesn’t. One Parisian said his mistress reprimanded him for not following the rules for mistresses: He should buy her presents and take her away for the weekend at least once. If he follows these rules, she can tell her mother and her girlfriends about it. There will certainly be frustrations along the way, but those problems won’t be compounded by a heavy social stigma and false expectations about where the relationship is headed.

I was amazed that some French people, and a few Japanese, never confronted their spouses for cheating. In the case of one Parisian couple, the affair eventually ended, the husband sensed that his wayward wife had returned emotionally to their marriage, and they seemed to be living in a state of reasonable contentment. The affair caused a difficult period, but this didn’t erupt into a long and consuming crisis. I don’t think I’d be capable of reacting to an infidelity with such composure. But I might be better off if I could.

There’s something else that we could learn from pretty much any foreign country. The American idea that a husband and wife should reveal the entire contents of their brains to each other doesn’t exist anywhere else. Doing so probably removes a necessary mystery from marriage. It might be better to have some secrets, or at least to pretend that you do.

Americans may finally be getting more realistic about infidelity. The latest crop of advice from experts is that married couples should discuss the distinct possibility that—shock!—each might one day be attracted to someone else. The couples are supposed to devise a strategy for what to do if this happens.
The experts reason that an affair can be averted if either party is allowed to come home from work and confess that he or she was invited out for lunch by a cute colleague, and that the offer was tempting. Removing the secret build-up supposedly makes an affair less enticing.

I doubt that any of the affair-busting techniques invented by America’s marriage-industrial complex will dent the overall levels of infidelity here. It doesn’t seem humanly possible for a society to cheat much less than we do. We’re already near the bottom of the world adultery rankings. Just as economies have a certain level of structural unemployment, countries seem to have a minimum level of structural infidelity (around 3 percent of men are unfaithful in a given year). The only countries known to have dipped far below that level are Bangladesh and Kazakhstan, which have other problems.

Americans have the luxury of setting standards for marriage and fidelity that people in some other countries wouldn’t dream of. In Diane Johnson’s novel Le Divorce, a married Frenchman tells his young American lover, “Your founding fathers expressed a hope for the future and a commitment to preparing the conditions that would make possible the best outcomes. But somewhere along the way, hope was transubstantiated into belief incarnate. I believe you call it The Power of Positive Thinking. Of course French people have no such delusions that things will work out for the best.” Most likely, we Americans will go on believing they will.

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