

Playing Around

Women and Infidelity

Linda Wolfe

A photograph of a black bra hanging on the edge of a white bedside table. The table is next to a bed with white pillows and a white sheet. The background is a light-colored wall.

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To Max

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PLAYING AROUND

Part I

From Adultery to Extramarital Sex

Men are like the earth and we are the moon; we turn always one side to them, and they think there is no other, because they don't see it—but there is.

—Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm*

Chapter 1

The Spirit of the Times

I knew only the fiction and very few of the realities about women who were having extramarital sexual affairs until the mid-1960s. In those days, married to my first husband, I was working part-time as a researcher and journalist, raising my baby daughter, and living in a populous section of Manhattan's West Side. The neighborhood, filled with parks and expansive river views, seemed to me a conventional, orderly place, dominated by the playground on the corner. It was the year-round headquarters—a steaming desert in summer where we mothers sat in milk-dripped slacks, eating popsicle leftovers and trying to keep from melting away ourselves, the Siberian steppes in winter, when we braved the ten-degree cold and howling river winds to give colicky babies their fill of air.

The street itself seemed just a corridor to the real stage of our lives, the public school down the corner. On it, before nine and after three, balletic mothers hurried to and from the school, swooping the ground after a trailing shoelace, stooping one-legged to retrieve a fallen lunchbox, waving on tiptoe to a friend down the block, moving, moving fast.

It was only after I had lived there a while that I came to see my sur-

roundings differently, and to discover that what had seemed a world exclusively of mothers and children was actually an environment shared extensively by male lovers, some of them fantasied, others quite real. In the small apartment building in which I lived, there were eight married mothers with small children. In a few months' time, four of them confided to me that they had been involved in extramarital sexual relationships. A neighbor further down the street was picked up by Cadillac by her lover every morning about half a block from her house right after she had walked her three children to school. Another met hers for breakfast at the local luncheonette three times a week, then escorted him past her doorman, each carrying a briefcase underarm, as if they were colleagues on a lengthy research project.

For those who did not have lovers, the subject of extramarital sex was nevertheless conversationally prominent. It is true it was discussed with lower voices than those used on feedings, the air, the permissiveness or lack of it at private schools, or the drunken superintendent who stole the TV in the co-op. But who was or wasn't having extramarital sex, how to, whether, and why filled up hours of park bench time.

The phrase that was most often used by my neighbors to describe sexual experience outside marriage was "playing around." They used it in preference to the others in the roster of imprecise and harsh expressions available in the English language, a roster that went from the obscene, like screwing or fucking around, to the degrading, like two-timing or cheating. A few women called extramarital sexual experience "having affairs," but they were sometimes challenged as to whether the expression was precise for some of the short-term sexual activity they were describing; one woman said she thought that in German there was a useful word that translated as sidestepping; another liked the connotation of dalliance. But playing around was the most frequent expression, even though when a woman used it, it was always with a touch of irony; playing around might have gains and losses, but there were no rules or umpires or clearcut goals, and those who participated were rarely playful or lighthearted.

Despite my attempts at sophistication, I found I was uneasy. I had been raised, like so many of us, on Anna Karenina face up beneath

a railroad carriage, on Emma Bovary pale and vomiting arsenic, on Hester Prynne shamed in the marketplace. But these were women of fiction. I had grown up with the knowledge of the affairs of Madame de Staël and George Sand and of the trial of Queen Caroline of England for adultery. But these were rich women, women of another class. Middle-class women didn't have affairs once they married. I think I learned this at my mother's knee. So my reactions to my neighbors who were having extramarital sex were complicated, contradictory. On the one hand, I condemned them, considered them cruel; they were betraying their husbands, their children, even their sex, which from time past had been assigned the victim role when it came to adultery; husbands wandered from wives, not the other way around; and there was comfort in that role. But on the other hand, something in me admired them, admired their ability to find lovers, their know-how at secrecy and their determination not to be victims, not to let life plough them underground in Riverside Park.

I found myself wondering about their lives, listening avidly to their stories, and experiencing vicarious enjoyment as well as anxiety at each new saga they reported. I think it was then that the idea for this book first occurred to me. My own confusion of feelings was part of what interested me about the subject. I was also interested in it because, while I knew that extramarital sex had not been reported as having increased since Kinsey's time (he had stated in 1953 that about one-fourth of the married women and one-half of the married men he had surveyed had had at least one extramarital affair), it did seem to me that among the women in my milieu, the rate was inordinately high. That milieu consisted of non-religious, economically secure, highly educated women; they were spirited and a little rebellious, but not particularly radical.

But I didn't turn to writing about the subject back then. My own life was undergoing considerable upheaval. My first marriage broke up. My work as a journalist became full time and more demanding. I began to concentrate on articles about marriage, divorce, and sexual behavior and therapy for various national and East Coast magazines, traveling the country to research some of them, examining my immediate environment for others. The women's movement had emerged

and for a while, my consciousness raised, I lost interest in the whys and wherefores of female extramarital sex. I suppose the topic seemed retrogressive. Once I discussed it with a friend, a divorced woman and an activist in the movement, who said to me, "Affairs are married women's opiate. If women are unhappy in marriage and seek their pleasure outside it, it is because marriage itself is an untenable institution. Ending it, not keeping it going with panaceas, is the only sensible solution and those who have extramarital affairs are simply slowing down the revolution."

Nevertheless in 1971, the year I remarried, I decided that I wanted to write a book about women and extramarital sex. Two exchanges took place shortly after my wedding that strengthened my determination. The first occurred the day one of my favorite long-married friends came over to the apartment to wish me congratulations. Rachel was pleased that I had remarried and wanted to tell me so. I was delighted to see her. Of all the brilliant and beautiful women I know, she is the most brilliant and beautiful. But her view of herself is dim. There is a well of depression at her center. She used to tell me there were days she woke, sent the children off to school, and simply, merely stared at her four walls.

"I would have told you sooner," she said quite exuberantly the day she came over, "but you've seemed so busy with your remarriage. I've got a lover. What do you think of that?"

"I think, *you too*. So what else is new?"

"You don't mean that," Rachel said.

"No," I said. "But I'm not as surprised as I would have been a while back. Does Bob know?"

"Are you kidding?"

"How come you have?" I asked.

She said, "The *Zeitgeist*."

Now it was my turn. "The spirit of the times? You can't mean that," I said.

"No," she said. "Not altogether." Then, "Look, I don't like the idea of myself as an adulterous wife. But there comes a time in every woman's marriage when she just doesn't feel the bedsheets under her, the quilt over her. Forget about bodies. She doesn't know what's under her or on

top of her or if the pillow is soft. And playing around, adultery, makes her know that the pillow is down, the sheet is woven of rough cotton, the blanket's wool."

It wasn't exactly the wedding present I had wanted from Rachel. Actually, I didn't even want to discuss Rachel's situation. Remarrying had made me complacent and sentimental and I didn't want to think about marital difficulties. I told Rachel this. I told her that the old-fashioned provisos still dominated my thinking and that I expected that my husband and I would be faithful to each other, emotionally and sexually. Exclusivity, I told Rachel, that's what the sociologists say is the basis for marriage, or, for that matter, any sexual liaisons that are meant to last.

Rachel merely wished me good luck. I remember her looking at me disdainfully as if I had insisted on some intellectually inferior notion, as if I had said the world was flat.

The other exchange arose during a conversation several months after our wedding when my husband said to me, over lunch, "What I want from a relationship is the sense that I will never want to wander. You give me that. I want you always to give me that."

At first I felt touched. I thought, how flattering. Later, on reflection, it seemed extraordinary. What a thing to say. It wasn't that I was surprised at the thought, but at the expression. I'm sure many people want from a love relationship the feeling of never again having to wander. Choosing anew is time-consuming; distracting; full of anguish. But still, how extraordinary. I would never have expressed what I wanted in such a fashion. It seemed to me peculiarly and exclusively male.

It reminded me of something I had read years before in the words of a fourteenth-century bourgeois called the Menagier de Paris who, upon marrying, had tried to instruct his fifteen-year-old bride in morality and domestic care. The menagier had also wanted never again to wander. "In God's name, I believe that when two good and honorable people are wed, all other loves are put far off, destroyed and forgotten, save only the love of each for the other. And meseems that when they are in each other's presence, they look upon each other more than upon the others, they clasp and hold each other and

they do not willingly speak or make sign save to each other.” But it was part of his upbringing, part of his male expertise, to know that men *did* explore beyond their wives. How to prevent it?

He first warned his young wife that should he ever do so, it needn't be the end of her pretty world. Men had wandered and, when their wives were patient enough or wily enough, returned. But the menagier realized that more useful than knowing how to outwait or win back a husband would be to know how to keep a spouse's love at such a peak that he would never flee. After thinking how his wife might best accomplish this, he came up with this prescription: “I pray you to bewitch and bewitch again your husband, and beware of dripping roof and smoking fire, and scold him not, and be unto him gentle and amiable and peaceable. Be careful that in winter he has good fire without smoke, and let him rest well and be well-covered between your breasts and thus bewitch him ...”

I did not find the menagier's equation of fidelity with material comforts strange. For all I know, such comforts are the very things that do keep people sexually loyal to each other. But what I found strange was how unlikely it would be for a woman, five hundred years ago or today, to say to her husband, “If you do such and so for me, you will keep me from adultery.” Many women today have an intellectual awareness of the prevalence of female extramarital sex; they know that according to statistics one out of four of them is likely to have at least one extramarital affair. But despite this, they rarely prepare for the possibility that they may one day be tempted to have such relations, even to the extent of discussing with their husbands how to ward them off. Extramarital sexual encounters seem always to take a woman unawares and she invariably feels like the first woman in the world to have had the experience. I remember thinking that there might be value in loosening the covers that still shroud women's extramarital experiences just so that the woman who finds herself in an adulterous situation would know that others had been there before her and survived.

Whatever the motivating event, it had by then occurred to me that the openness concerning extramarital sex that I had experienced among my neighbors was not just a phenomenon unique to a few perhaps

neurotic lives but rather, a reflection of a change in the mores, a *Zeitgeist*, as Rachel had said. By then I was reading in a variety of sources that just as we had moved through a period which had caused our society at large to relinquish taboos on premarital sex, so we were now traversing one which would end by abandoning strictures on extramarital sex. A number of factors seemed to support this assumption.

There were public revelations which only ten years ago would have been kept secret: Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson intimating the adulteries of her husband, our president; Buzz Aldrin, our great astro-hero detailing his in the pages of *McCall's*; Viet Nam prisoners of war returning home and announcing that one of their frequent emotional chores had been to deal with their wives' extramarital liaisons; Nigel Nicholson lauding the homosexual adulteries of his parents; Barbara Howar handling the trauma of turning thirty by buying a diamond necklace and having an affair.

Beyond revelations, there were semantics. More revealing to me than the outspoken confessions of individuals was a more subtle change that I observed in the field of marriage counseling. Many psychologists, psychiatrists, and marriage counselors had taken to using the term "extramarital sex" as if it were a euphemism to replace the old familiar word "adultery." *Why*, I would ask some two dozen of them. The two terms have precisely the same meanings. Adultery means sexual intercourse between a married man and someone other than his wife, or between a married woman and someone other than her husband; extramarital sex means sex outside, beyond, besides marriage. But invariably when I asked mental health workers why they preferred "extramarital sex," they would reply, "Because 'adultery' has negative connotations," and they would say, somewhat ostrich-like I thought, that perhaps by changing the word, the connotation of the act would alter.

And beyond semantics, there were pronouncements: Dr. Lonny Myers, Director of Medical Education for Chicago's Midwest Population Center, declaring that extramarital sex is not the messy disturbed experience we view it but that "it can be related to maturity, personal growth, better marriages and joy"; Corliss Lamont writing in *The New York Times* that one way to forestall the ever-blossoming divorce rate

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