



MARAL SASSOUNI

Separate Vacations

A marriage should last until death do us part. But why not take time off for bad behavior?

BY JOHN SEDGWICK

I HAVE BEEN HAPPILY MARRIED FOR MORE THAN A DECADE NOW. YET AS much as I love my wife, I am not blind to all the other attractive women around, and such sights sometimes seem to call for action. My marriage vows remain unbroken, let me quickly add. But the extracurricular temptation persists, especially in warm weather. Now, confessions of this type are inherently unseemly and should probably be saved for posthumous memoirs, but what the hell. For the sake of elucidating the true nature of marriage, let me tell you what happened—or nearly happened—with Lisa.

I met her one summer on Martha's Vineyard, the sort of place that, with its languid air and casual ways, immediately stirs up the libidinal juices. I was on a magazine assignment to check out the island's social scene, and my editor had told me to be sure to visit the nude beaches. That was fine with me—anything for a story—but as a stranger to the island, I didn't know exactly where those beaches were or how to get to them. That's where Lisa comes in.

She was my waitress at a fancy seafood place I visited my first night on the island. She was attractive and vivacious in a windswept, outdoorsy sort of



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way. To judge by her ring finger, she was also unmarried. After she had cleared away my entrée, I put the question to her: Would she take me there?

I don't normally ask such questions of perfect strangers, and perhaps she sensed a certain innocence about me, because, after only a moment's hesitation, she said okay. (Later, she asked me to prove that I really was a magazine writer, but she started laughing before I had a chance to answer.)

We met at the restaurant the next afternoon and drove together to Gay Head, on the southwest corner of the island, and then strolled down the beach there toward some rocky cliffs. The farther we went, the fewer clothes the beach-goers wore, and the more loudly my heart pounded.

Lisa led me to a spot at the foot of some towering cliffs where a group of nudists were wallowing in a pool of mud like hip-

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pos. These were Gay Head's celebrated mud baths, Lisa explained, and an important stop on any tour of the island. Then she turned to me. "Well," she said, "shall we, like, get naked?" In seconds, she had removed her top and dropped her shorts to reveal an enticing body I can still picture quite vividly, and she started climbing up the cliffside to the baths. I shyly disrobed and followed after her. We plopped down in the mud and eased back under the shimmering sun. The mud was cool and oozy like an extrathick milk shake, and it felt like a water bed ought to—wonderfully soft and pillowy and inviting. Lisa lolled in the mud beside me, her breasts bobbing in the primordial ooze.

Given the situation, I'd have to be a eunuch or a liar to say it didn't occur to me to reach over, slither my arm around her, and draw her to me. It occurred to me, sure, but I didn't do it. Because I was married, and married people aren't supposed to do that. Not the way I was raised in Dedham, Massachusetts, at any rate, where my father's ideas about other women might have come from an antiques store: Look But Don't Touch. As Lisa lolled beside me, I have to say I was a little sorry about that.

OTHERS WOULD DEMONSTRATE FEWER scruples in such a situation, I suspect, if the current staggering infidelity rates are any indication. America was alarmed back in the forties when Kinsey first reported that 50 percent of all husbands and 26 percent of all wives had had

at least one extramarital affair by the age of 40. Since then, Americans have become either more promiscuous or more candid, for the rates have increased steadily with subsequent reports.

The 1980 *Hite Report* claimed that 72 percent of men married more than two years had had an affair. In her 1988 book, *Quiet Desperation*, the psychologist Jan Halper set the figure for married men at an astonishing 82 percent—an indictment of practically every husband in the land.

And, perhaps spurred on by their husbands' example, wives have expanded their own interest in extramarital sex. A 1980 *Cosmopolitan* survey reported that of all married women between the ages of 18 and 34, 50 percent confessed to having had an affair. Married women over 35 were even more "experienced": 69.2 percent had taken a lover on the side. Shere Hite's 1987 tome, *Women and Love*, claimed that 70 percent of all women married five years or more had been unfaithful at least once.

Moralists recoil from such statistics as further evidence of America's declining standards. But perhaps they should be more tolerant of a practice that, if the statistics are to be believed, appears now to be nearly universal. It seems that every day brings news of yet another leading citizen—a presidential candidate, fundamentalist minister, pro athlete, movie star, or ex-billionaire—who has succumbed to the adulterous urge. Even Jimmy Carter confessed to lust in his heart.

But Americans want their affairs and their marriages, too. As sex researchers have noted with puzzlement ever since Kinsey, we believe in monogamy *even as we engage in adultery*. As I lay beside Lisa in the mud, I found myself longing to traipse off with her to some parallel universe where I could indulge myself with her completely and then return to my married life as though nothing had happened. In this universe, alas, such acts have consequences: for me, terrible, nagging guilt probably culminating in some gruesome confession scene the results of which I don't even dare to imagine. That's what has kept us Bostonians so proper. And so I remained faithful.

But as I encounter the Lisas of the world, I do sometimes wonder what is really being accomplished by being so virtuous. Most mammals take their pleasure where they find it, and our fellow primates are for the most part shameless libertines. Why should humans be any different?

Don't get me wrong. I enjoy the security and reliability of monogamy, and I like my marriage. But might there not be someplace for the exercise of simple lust in this arrangement? A kind of escape hatch for the libido?

Europeans manage to keep a lover on the side without much bother to anyone,

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but I doubt such a system would work here in Boston. We're too squeamish about hypocrisy. Monogamy and infidelity simply don't fit together very well. At least not simultaneously.

But here's the thing: how about sequentially? After all, in every other human activity the participants get a break, a little time off, a change of pace.

If one can take a vacation from work, why not from love?

If it were up to me, I'd pattern a "love vacation" after the seventh-year sabbaticals enjoyed by college professors, and I'd say the same even if I hadn't met Lisa in the seventh year of my marriage. Professors face a lifetime of exhaustive concentration on a single, narrow area of study, a commitment that is not altogether different from that of a spouse to a marriage, and they find liberation in their seventh year's

The very illicitness of third-party relationships makes them attractive.

respire from the routine.

So how about a marriage sabbatical? After seven years of marriage, each spouse would be free to spend seven weeks' vacation (an academic year would be too long) away from the marriage with whomever he or she chose. A sexual holiday, in short. If a husband had a hankering for some voluptuous young thing he met on Martha's Vineyard, say, he would be free to pursue her to his heart's content during those seven weeks.

By the same token, if a wife had an interest in that nice young man down the hall in apartment C, she would be equally free to say hello—and more—to him during the same time, although I'll grant that women—those with children, at least—are far less likely than men to take advantage of such an opportunity. Both parties could conduct their affairs openly, without guilt and without guile. That's the whole idea: the marriage sabbatical would be a regular part of the marriage routine.

But only for seven weeks after seven years. I don't think of the sabbatical plan as a license to screw around indefinitely. Spouses would have to indulge their passion selectively, during the seven weeks in their year of liberation. Instead of undermining a marriage, the marriage sabbatical may well serve to restore it, reawakening sexual desires that may have gone dormant over the years. And spouses finally given a chance to indulge their adulterous fantasies may well discover how much they already have in their marriage. After all, it is only after traveling that one fully appreciates home.

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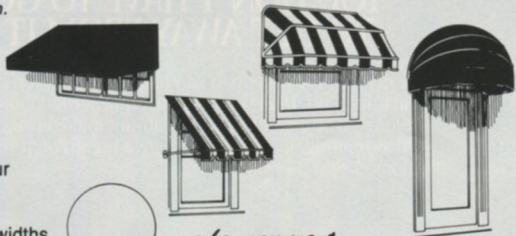


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Who knows? Such license might end up foreclosing the adulterous option entirely. For some, it may be the very illicitness of third-party relationships that makes them so attractive; if embossed with the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval, adultery might lose its appeal. If the sabbatical plan takes hold, there might even be a period set aside on the calendar for it—in the doldrums of midwinter, perhaps. And enterprising hoteliers might put up some special resorts where sexual vacationers could meet and mingle in a pleasant, out-of-the-way location, like Club Med. But I am getting ahead of myself.

NATURALLY, SOME QUESTIONS ARISE.

Why only seven weeks?

Because this carnival period is meant as a time-out from the marriage, not an end to it. Seven weeks should be plenty of time for spouses to exercise their mad passions.

Isn't there a risk that some "vacationers" won't go back to their spouses?

Sure, but no greater risk than with conventional extramarital affairs, and possibly much less once the seven-week holiday becomes an accepted custom.

What about the laws against adultery?

Lawmakers might see the marriage sabbatical as a profamily initiative that promises to curb divorces, reduce infidelity, and eliminate the hypocrisy that now clouds marital relations, and decide to amend those laws. But I admit that isn't very likely. The truth is that the marriage sabbatical doesn't need legal blessing any more than premarital sex (or extramarital sex, for that matter) does now.

Why would a spouse be any less jealous just because this extramarital affair has suddenly been proclaimed "okay"?

No doubt there would still be some sexual jealousy at first, but it would be diminished by the fact that both spouses would be equally free to take their own vacations. Plus, the practice would be so common and aboveboard that the spouse left behind would not feel singled out for shame and humiliation, as is currently the case.

It would be quite evident that all married Americans were regularly doing the same thing. It would be normal.

One last question: If the marriage sabbatical system had been in place when I met Lisa, would I have made use of it? I don't know, to be honest. If I had, I'm sure I'd have felt plenty guilty about it afterward. Maybe monogamy is too deeply ingrained in us (or at least in me) to violate it freely. If that proves to be the case for everyone, we could always go back to our old, covert ways. But it would be interesting to find out, wouldn't it? □

John Sedgwick is a freelance writer whose articles have appeared in the Atlantic, GQ, and Esquire.

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