

CAN THIS BE LOVE?

THE REWARDS, AND RISKS, OF SNOOPING

I've heard it said that women are born knowing how to snoop in much the same way that men are born knowing how to hunt. I would argue against this notion only so far as to say that I don't think that snooping is an innate ability in women, not like, say, our ability to fall in love with the wrong man. That said, we do seem to be more interested in it—and certainly more adept at it—than men, who are, in comparison, babes in the woods. Even those of us whose partners lead the most blameless of lives seem occasionally to have a need to ferret out hidden shreds of information they may harbor in their breasts, breast *pockets*, or bureau drawers. And then we torture ourselves with questions such as: Why does he keep this picture of his ex-girlfriend using a Nautilus machine? What kind of a woman would sign a letter "Pat-i-cakes"? How old are these ticket stubs?

I believe our penchant for snooping stems in part from a youthful respect for Nancy Drew. We yearn to be the heroines of our own detective stories. Ergo, "The Case Of The Unidentified American Express Receipt." Men are uniquely suited to providing the plots for these mysteries. Early on in life we notice that, as a group, they are less forthcoming than we are and, more to the point, less forthcoming than we would like them to be. We find out that there is a whole legion of males who impart information about themselves as stingily as if it were patented, and with whom conversations about emotional issues are so one-sided they can be compared to Freudian analysis. Such reticence, which makes even the blandest among them seem to live lives filled with covert activity, encourages us to get information about them in detective-like ways, i.e., by looking through their appointment books, "overhearing" their phone conversations and going through their mail.

While I'm not in a position to pass moral judgments (particularly since my position is often that of kneeling by the wastebasket going through my partner's discarded correspondence), I realize that snooping can hardly be called a laudatory practice, not when you compare it to hospital volunteer work, or organ donation. And looking through your partner's drawers hardly falls into the same category of innocent curiosity as looking through his photo album. People tend to look down on snoopers, a pejorative view reflected in the remark of one

friend's husband who, finding his wife going through his pockets, asked if she also went through the pockets of accident victims.

My own partner considers snooping to be a form of behavior on a par with stealing. In fact, he prefers that I *would* steal rather than glance at anything he considers private, i.e., anything he doesn't actually present to me with the words "Here, look at this." He believes that prying into somebody else's things, especially his, is unprincipled, and warns that such behavior would be especially risky in my case, since I would then be bankrupt both morally *and* financially.

Whatever your own partner might think, if you're a snooper worth your salt you've got to look upon what you do as a positive activity, one that is actually beneficial to him. After all, the more you know about him, the more you are able to meet his needs (except, perhaps, his need for privacy). Think of yourself as an information gatherer, much like your partner's doctor or tax man, applying what you learn to his benefit and the benefit of your relationship. That's certainly the attitude of my friend Elaine, who confessed that she regularly reads the notes her partner keeps about his therapy sessions. She defends the practice by saying that it is the only way she can find out what's on his mind, since asking him to talk about himself is as productive as asking the Lincoln Memorial to talk about the Civil War. And her partner is gratified by her amazing sensitivity to his concerns. "He calls me a mind reader," she says, "when actually my reading abilities are more or less confined to the printed page."

This is the plus side of snooping, but there's a minus side to the practice as well, i.e., the possibility that you may find out more than you bargained for. You may go out looking for evidence that your partner is planning a surprise party for your birthday, and unearth your present instead: a made-to-order replica of his mother's Persian lamb coat. And then you have to live quietly with that knowledge for the next two weeks!

If you aren't frightened by the pitfalls of snooping, however, then you are probably a true seeker of knowledge. Who knows what mountains of information you can amass if you work at it. Too bad it isn't an accomplishment you can share with your partner.

by Bette-Jane Raphael