

CAN'T HELP MYSELF

*Lessons and Confessions from
a Modern Advice Columnist*

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**GRAND CENTRAL
PUBLISHING**

NEW YORK BOSTON

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Grand Central Publishing
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10104
grandcentralpublishing.com
twitter.com/grandcentralpub

First Edition: April 2018

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBN 978-1-4555-4377-9 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-4555-4378-6 (ebook)

Printed in the United States of America

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter 2

You Make Me Wanna Snoop

You'd think it would take a while—like, more than a few weeks—for people to trust a new advice columnist with their personal problems.

You'd think people would want to read a few dozen responses from that advice columnist, just to make sure she's not some self-help-spewing fraud, before submitting any letters of their own.

But within weeks of the launch of *Love Letters*, my inbox was full of notes from strangers who detailed steamy one-night stands, serial cheating, horrible first dates, and the overwhelming grief and financial devastation caused by divorce. It was as if people in Boston had been desperate to confess.

One of the first letters was from a guy who was ready to walk out on his fiancée. I got the sense he was telling me something no one else knew.

"I'm getting married next month, but I think I'm in love with another woman," he wrote. "I was always anxious about

the engagement and upcoming marriage, but I took that to be cold feet or whatever. Then I met someone else who I connected with instantly, in many ways more deeply than with my fiancée. I haven't cheated on her, but I've wanted to."

The ease with which these letter writers shared their secrets and concerns was humbling—and jarring.

"You don't even know me," I'd mutter to my computer screen while reading submissions.

Of course, that wasn't entirely true. From my name, readers knew that I was probably Jewish. If they googled me, they saw a picture of a short, average-width blond woman in her early thirties. My relationship status wasn't public on Facebook, but my profile suggested I wasn't married.

Occasionally a reader would write in to ask me about my credentials, and I would tell them what I told my editors—that most advice columnists weren't practicing mental health professionals, because responsible mental health professionals don't give directives based on a four-hundred-word generalization of a problem. My column might be helpful, but the real mission was to engage and entertain.

That kind of question, though, led me to do more research about where I fit into the history of advice givers, and the more I read, the more I learned that it was a pretty Jewish thing to do. Ann Landers, Dear Abby, and Judith Martin, also known as Miss Manners, were all Jewish, which made sense to me. I wasn't raised with much religion, but I knew Judaism was big on questions and discussion. Happiness in marriage seemed to be a big deal for the faith. At least that's what I'd learned from *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Eventually I read about *A Bintel Brief*, the Yiddish advice

column started by the editor of *The Forward*, and was shocked to see how the romantic quandaries of the early twentieth century were not so different from the ones I saw now.

As the column grew, I met readers in real life who asked whether I had a system for answering letters—how I chose problems and came up with my responses. I explained that I answered letters at random, usually in the order they were received, and that my opinions came from my gut.

I did have some rules, though, when it came to process. I learned I needed specific controls to come up with proper advice.

I experienced writer's block at the office—in part because I feared my coworkers could look over my shoulder and see people's private correspondence—so I answered all letters at home, in pajamas.

I also needed complete silence, no music allowed. If my favorite Janet Jackson songs were on in the background, I'd be more likely to tell people to get single. If I was listening to something like Bon Iver, I'd tell letter writers to do all they could to be held by someone who loved them.

Every letter was unique; people with similar problems always faced different circumstances. I told my mom, "No two letters are alike, and they all include such specific details." With every one, I started from scratch.

But when it came to those unique letters, I did see trends. One of the most common quandaries was the anxiety that accompanied the wait for "I love you." I received so many "When will my partner say 'I love you'?" queries in the first months of *Love Letters* that I could have published a spinoff advice column called "Those Three Words."

The other common problem—which was more difficult for me to unpack—was snooping.

In 2009 and 2010, with the growth of Facebook and ever-improving smartphone messaging systems, there were new and complicated ways to spy on a partner. I was shocked by the number of people who had no respect for their significant other’s privacy—or, in some cases, the law. They broke into email accounts. They cracked codes.

My ex, Patrick, wasn’t a technology guy, so I wouldn’t have been able to do much snooping on him when we were together, even if I’d wanted to. He didn’t have a Facebook account and used an early-model flip phone.

But even before Patrick, I’d never snooped on anyone. Part of it was that I believed in privacy, but I was also too afraid of what I might discover. I’d always preferred blissful ignorance to finding out someone didn’t love me anymore. I wanted to pretend things were working even when they weren’t.

I would have made sweeping judgments about these letter writers—the readers who were so quick to admit an invasion of privacy—if not for the fact that I was related to a snoop. That made me a bit more empathetic.

My older sister, Brette, whom I’d thought of as a mostly respectful human being, had become a first-time snoop at thirty-four years old.

After one intense decade-long relationship from twenty-one to thirty-one, which was followed by several years of hooking up with men (and a few women) around New York City, Brette—a casting director—met someone she wanted to date exclusively.

“I picked him up while he was manning a booth at the

Bryant Park holiday market,” Brette explained during a late-night phone call.

“Of course you did,” I responded, once again in awe of my sister’s ability to turn any gathering of humans—including an outdoors crafts fair—into a singles event.

“He’s a glassblower, and he’s ten years younger.”

“Of course he is,” I said, because this was so like my sister.

“We met in the booth where he was selling his glass,” she said. “I saw him and I had to have him.”

Brette explained that her holiday market acquisition was a twenty-four-year-old named Ben. He blew glass full-time and often visited Cape Cod, where his family owned a toy store.

She described him as round, jolly, and with a big beard.

“Like Santa?” I asked.

“But Jewish!” Brette gushed.

Brette said that after meeting young Ben at the holiday market, she asked him to join her at a get-together she was planning at a bar in Midtown. He accepted the invite and met her at the venue, where they wound up making out in front of Brette’s friends.

After that first “date,” they began spending weekends together. He would travel from his apartment in the Hudson River Valley, where he had a glassblowing studio, and would stay with her in her apartment in Alphabet City.

From what I could tell, Brette and Ben never got sick of each other, even though many of their dates lasted an entire weekend. She was the happiest I’d seen her in years.

My mom and I had concerns about their age difference—specifically whether Brette should be spending so much time with a twenty-four-year-old artist who was nowhere close to

settling down—but we couldn't help but love Ben once we met him. He was like human Xanax, the sort of guy whose kind smile could dissolve any of our bad moods or family bickering. We were in awe of his art, specifically his collection of intricate glass marbles. He also made complicated and colorful glass pipes that reminded us of Truffula Trees.

Whenever we all met up at Brette's place in New York, Ben would show us his latest creations. A pipe that looked like a candy cane. A pipe that looked like something you'd find in a coral reef. A pipe that looked like a cat's butt. (Cat butt pipes would become Ben's most popular offering. You put whatever you're smoking in the cat's butthole, just below the glass tail.)

"They're for pot," my mom would say, of the intricate creations, pretending not to be fazed, her smile tense. She'd always been a cool, open-book kind of mom, but because she'd spent her college years cooped up in a practice room at Juilliard, she'd never done drugs.

"I can recognize the smell of marijuana now," she'd tell me, impressed with herself. "It smells very sweet."

My mom and I loved to watch Ben and Brette get affectionate with each other because it wasn't your typical PDA. They stroked each other like pets and spoke in an invented language. Brette had always made up strange words and nicknames—her childhood name for me was Lush (rhyming with tush), which she never defined or explained—but Ben was the first guy who met her at her level of weirdness.

"Bee-bah, I love you," Brette would murmur to Ben, while rubbing his arms.

"Bee-bah, I love you, too, lady," he'd say in return.

With their round faces and curly brown hair, they looked like bear cubs at play—or in heat. Once, during a visit to New York, I walked in on them cuddling in bed. She was stroking his chest hair and called it “chest Narnia.” She pointed to his nipple and said, “Aslan.” I nodded and exited the room.

At the start of their relationship, Brette claimed she understood that the partnership might have a shelf life because of Ben’s age. At twenty-four, he hadn’t had many dating experiences, whereas at thirty-four, Brette had sown enough oats to choke a horse.

The longer they dated, though, the more she wanted him to be her real partner. Brette didn’t know if Ben was capable of a long-term commitment, but she wanted him to try.

“But he’s so young,” I told her one night, thinking about how *not* ready for commitment I’d been at twenty-four. “Think about where you were at that age, Brette. He’s a kid.”

“I know,” Brette said, with a sad sigh.

“Also,” she added, “there’s another obstacle. A big one.”

“What?” I asked.

“Katya.”

My sister said the name “Katya” the way Cruella De Vil says “the puppies.”

Brette explained that one of Ben’s closest friends was a woman named Katya, another artist he’d known for years. She was younger and thinner than Brette, with ivory skin, long brownish hair, and Cara Delevingne eyebrows.

Brette feared that now that Ben had a serious girlfriend, Katya would realize what she was missing and try to steal him away. Brette admitted that she’d pored over Katya’s social media photos looking for evidence of a diabolical plan. She was

also full-on snooping—checking Ben’s texts and Facebook messages for proof. This surprised me because Brette was nothing like my friends and readers who played detective with the people they dated. I thought she was too self-assured—and maybe even too ignorant about technology—to take part in that kind of behavior.

I opened Katya’s Facebook page, the part that was public, to see what all the fuss was about. A few photos were of her and Ben in outdoorsy locations. They looked like pals, smiling with their arms around each other.

But the images didn’t put Brette at ease. They made her feel old and temporary. She stared at Ben in the photos, imagining a thought bubble over his head that said, “Now that I’ve learned my lessons with Brette, I’m confident enough to finally pursue the love of my life, Katya.”

“I don’t mean to be a jerk,” I told Brette, “but Ben is not, like, Ryan Gosling or anything. He’s a great guy, but I don’t see women falling at his feet. I don’t understand why you think Katya—or anyone else for that matter—would be desperate to lure him into bed or steal him away.”

Brette sighed through the phone, like I had said something very stupid.

“Fat Jewish guys are *in* right now, Meredith!” she yelled. “All of these Judd Apatow movies! Everybody wants a big, funny Jewish guy who smokes pot and blows glass! Ben *is* Ryan Gosling right now. Ben!”

“I see,” I responded, trying to remember the rant word for word so I could tell my mother about it later.

It was difficult for me to fully understand Brette’s concerns because I never feared the Katyas of the world. It’s not that

I was too self-confident to get jealous; it was more that guys tended to break up with me for *nobody*.

Patrick was content to start over alone. Same with my college boyfriend, who just wanted to be done with our relationship.

I told Brette that she shouldn't worry about Katya because Ben had known her for the better part of a decade. If they'd wanted to sleep together, they would have by now.

"Think about Pete," I told Brette, referring to my sports-writer friend, whom I'd met when I was eighteen, when I first arrived at college. "I've known Pete for years. He's an attractive guy who means a lot to me, but I've never thought about being with him like that. I'm not going to wake up one day and suddenly be attracted to Pete. Maybe Ben is Katya's Pete."

"To be honest," Brette said, "I've never understood why you haven't had sex with Pete. I'd *absolutely* have sex with Pete. I think you *should* have sex with Pete."

"But I really don't want to," I told her. "Just like Ben doesn't want to have sex with Katya. Some people don't have the desire to have sex with everyone in their lives."

"That's stupid," Brette said, and then proceeded to name all the people in my life she'd want to sleep with if she were me. My married work friend, Mark. My friend Tito from college. My friend Adam, who's in a band.

I told Brette she was projecting her own desires onto Ben. She might be the kind of person who walks into a social event and sizes up every guest as a potential sexual partner, but many people aren't like that. Certainly not Ben, who seemed more like me.

When I arrive at a party, the first thing I size up is the food. Is there cheese? What is the cupcake situation?

“If anyone’s going to cheat, it’s *you*,” I told Brette. “You’re the one who wants to make a move on everyone you meet. You’re the one who has to manage your impulses in order to be faithful to Ben.”

“True,” Brette said.

But even though she understood my point, my sister’s jealousy kept getting the best of her. The more she grew to care for Ben, the more she turned to Facebook for new clues about Katya.

She snooped again and again, waiting to find the inevitable betrayal.

Based on what I found in my column’s inbox, it seemed that people like Brette were everywhere, all of them seeking to solve some relationship mystery, even if they didn’t know what it was.

Most of my letter writers were more sophisticated about their snooping than my sister. Whereas Brette simply grabbed Ben’s phone or computer while he was busy blowing glass, relying on saved passwords to check his messages, my readers hacked profiles like the Simon Pegg character did in *Mission Impossible*. A few implied they were addicted to snooping and would read a partner’s messages every few hours without them knowing.

One letter writer confessed to checking his girlfriend’s email, using language that made him sound like some sort of operative. He didn’t seem to understand that even though she was cheating, he had also committed an act of betrayal. “I ran a search for any dialogue between her and her ex. Needless to

say, I found *a lot* of correspondence,” he wrote, like he was the good guy.

Most commenters abhorred snooping, but one early contributor, Tricia, told other readers that snooping in her youth helped her learn to trust her gut. By confirming her theories about who was being truthful and who was spouting lies, she became confident about her feelings. She said she rarely snooped in the present because she'd learned that when something felt wrong, it probably was.

I began to understand her point. It seemed that for some people, snooping led to peace, or at the very least, the ability to ask the right questions. Sometimes it led to a breakup that was a long time coming.

That's what I began to tell readers—that snooping *is* bad—perhaps unforgivable. If you're set on doing it anyway, you have to think about why—and what made you hit that wall.

In the end, that's how snooping helped my sister.

After logging into Ben's Facebook account and reading his private messages over and over, Brette was forced to admit that Ben's relationship with Katya was platonic. All she found were benign, kind messages, and based on what she read, Katya had never tempted him to stray.

The more important truth, though, was that the lack of evidence of cheating didn't put Brette at ease, because like most of my snooping letter writers, my sister was worried about something bigger, something that went far beyond Katya.

Katya represented youth and infinite possibility—all of the things Brette knew Ben would be giving up to be with her. Katya was still wandering the world, like Ben, while Brette was ready to nest.

“You do realize that Katya has nothing to do with this,” I told Brette, who admitted that she still felt unsettled after so many snoops. “You’re just worried that Ben won’t be able to commit because he’s twenty-four. That’s what’s really going on here.”

“I know,” Brette said, sounding defeated.

“There’s no way to know the future,” I told her.

“You’re right,” she said.

“If you love him, all you can do is see if he keeps showing up.”

“Yeah,” she said, disappointed, because pretending it was all about Katya was a lot less scary.

SEEKING PERMISSION TO SNOOP

Q ■ I have been dating this guy, “Dave,” for a little over a month now. My problem is that I’m having a tough time trusting him. He’s absolutely amazing, and we have a great time together. We live about thirty minutes away from each other and he comes to my place about three times a week because it’s an easier commute. We have agreed not to see other people.

Here’s my problem: After our first date, he made a mistake and kind of took off for a few weeks without any type of communication. He basically dropped me. He apologized for this a few weeks later, and I decided to give him another chance. I’m happy I did because now it’s great.

He didn’t make excuses—he basically said he was an idiot for doing it and he understood that he may have ruined things, but never really gave me a reason why. Fast-forward to now. I still have this nagging feeling that I need to check up on him, and I have basically been forcing myself not to check his phone for something else going on. I should probably back up and tell you that I was in a very serious relationship before this for four years where I thought I was in something good (living together for three years), and then I was blindsided by a breakup. Two weeks later my ex got engaged to someone he had been talking to behind my back.

I’m over my ex and happier with my life than I have ever been. I know my need to check up on Dave probably has everything to do with my feelings about being burned, but if I have this weird feeling about it, I feel like I need to check things out for myself so I don’t drive myself insane worrying

that he's talking to another person. Is it okay to snoop a little on his phone or am I being the crazy girl?

—Possibly Crazy, Please Help!



A. It's not okay to check Dave's phone. You get no snooping pass from me.

It's also not okay to expect Dave to be super committed right now because you've only been together for about a month. It's fine that you guys decided to be exclusive, but you can't pretend there's a deep level of intimacy here.

Instead of obsessing over Dave's phone and the potential for infidelity, try focusing on how it feels to get to know him. As the weeks pass, are you more confident about the relationship? Do you know more about Dave's world? Are you having fun? You have to give this time to grow. Remember that everyone feels a little insecure at the start of something new.

Also, please let go of what happened after the first date. Dave didn't owe you anything back then, and sometimes it takes a while to get things going. Don't force him to make up for that onetime communication gap by making promises he can't keep.

—Meredith

READERS? WHAT DO YOU THINK?

You need to break up with him. You are going to snoop eventually, and you will find something that you will consider to be very, very bad. Like maybe he went on a few dates with someone else during this “disappearing” period, and you are going to view it as cheating or something else ridiculous. Just end it now.

— ALMIGHTYZEESUS

If you feel the need to snoop, you are either in the wrong relationship or not ready for one. This relationship is a month old and you should be deliriously happy at this point.

— ASH

The thing is, if you indulge this weird feeling, you won't be checking just once. You'll have unleashed the Kraken, and this will become your way of operating in the context of dating and relationships. — KAYTI

No, you can't snoop. He's not your ex. Yet. — WIZEN

CHECKING HIS GMAIL

Q. I really enjoy your column. I hope you (or perhaps Rico or Hoss) may be able to provide a bit of helpful insight.

I'm writing to you because I'm going through the worst breakup of my life. I really feel like my world has ended and I have no idea what to do.

My boyfriend of four-plus years took a job in Indonesia because it was a great opportunity for his career. He is a bit younger than me—I'm twenty-eight and he is twenty-five. Although it seemed impossible at first, we maintained a long-distance relationship. We talked on Skype and on the phone every day. Up until a month ago, we were madly in love and happy. Then out of nowhere he broke up with me. Over email.

I was shocked, saddened, and completely heartbroken. Unbeknownst to my ex, I have his Gmail password. I may or may not check his email then mark the messages I've read as "unread" (which is a trick I bet most readers aren't aware of). I'm finding non-sent letters to me in his Drafts, emails to and from other girls.

I know this is a horrible thing to do and is a huge breach of his trust, yet I have no idea how to stop myself. It's ruining my life. How do I ever move on? Has anyone else ever done something like this?

—My Heart Is in Indonesia, Swampscott



A 1. We must stop checking the Gmail, yes? It's an invasion of privacy. But more importantly, it's messing with your head. If you don't have the self-control to stop, email him and ask him to change his password. I know that sounds nuts, but I'm not worried about what he thinks—I'm worried about how you feel. The Gmail stops today.

2. He's twenty-five and across the world; it's not shocking that this didn't work out. It doesn't mean he didn't love you, and he probably did. I'm sorry you were left behind and that he dumped you by email (not that a Skype dumping would have been much better).

3. You're twenty-eight. You're young enough to have new experiences, but old enough to know what makes you happy. Why not focus on the life you have here? Make it great. Make something that's all yours. Allow yourself to be miserable for a bit and then pick up the pieces.

4. People are going to tell you that you're batty for checking the Gmail. They'll be right, for the most part. But so many of us have been there. So many of us have googled more than we should. Maybe we've "accidentally" driven by an apartment or peeked at a text meant for someone else. We've all had a low moment. You're having yours. You can forgive yourself, but make it stop. There's nothing for you in his inbox.

—Meredith

READERS? WHAT DO YOU THINK?

You've gotten a confession out and I can gladly confirm that you are indeed a member of the human race. As our astute hostess pointed out, we've all had premeditated loss-of-control moments in which we've snooped on some level. That being said, you will find out, as I and many countless others have, that [snooping] is an exercise in futility. Stop checking his Gmail. Stop cold turkey. You are only extending and aggravating the pain and heartache. Don't beat yourself up over it or feel guilty for it. Just stop doing it. Accept that it was silly to keep checking his email and be done with it. — HOSS

Unbelievable turds, spies, eavesdroppers. No, we haven't all done it. That's what's wrong with this society. — MIKE

I have learned the hard way never to check the email of a current boyfriend or ex. You are NEVER going to like what you find. I found out my bf was living a double life. Our relationship ended months later. Ignorance is bliss.

— TBRUSCHIFAN64