

# THE FAITHFUL DESPERADO

I JUST COMPLETED SEVEN YEARS of marriage without having to scratch the famous Itch. It's not something I dwell on, but when I speculate — usually idly — on having an affair, I'm surprised to have been faithful since my wedding.

Fidelity doesn't fit a self-image shaped by the sportings of a normal young adulthood. There were different loves of varying lengths and passions, some of them concurrent, before my wife and I got married. When that happened, at 30, I felt like the Desperado in the Eagles ballad of that name: come down from my fences to let somebody love me, but still a hard cowboy at heart.

I suppose my marriage vows were sincere, but good intentions were tempered by skepticism. I didn't see myself as Dagwood Bumstead, or Ralph Cramden or Chester Riley. I still wanted to be Archie Goodwin or Travis McGee. In the normal course of work that brings me together with interesting, attractive women, surely I would one day succumb — not entirely a victim — to the fever of an affair or at least a fling. It hasn't happened.

Publicly confessing fidelity is a risky step, hard to do without sounding sanctimonious. The supposed return to traditional values is the last bandwagon I'd want to ride. Then there's the risk of hypocrisy. I can't guarantee that this streak of fidelity won't end. The only way out is to confess ambivalence. I'm not so sure I want to be faithful. With both of us working, raising kids and running a household, married life takes on a draining routine. Lingering mornings of love play are long gone now; little feet and little stomachs and quirky faucets and job deadlines see to that, just as they lengthen the intervals between loving nights.

I know this is a normal, healthy, happy life that I'm intellectually committed to not betraying. But emotionally, it's not easy. In a busy home, the relentless demands of keeping things organized bring a hankering for an uncomplicated liaison. This isn't just a male trip, either; my wife feels the same pressures. Will neither of us again know the helpless thrill of a new love? It's an unsettling thought only halfway through life.

Fortunately for fidelity, it's not a simple contest of intellectual constancy versus renegade emotion. There's no such thing as an uncomplicated affair. Besides the excitement, I remember the lies, the sneaking and remorse that accompanied extra-relationship affairs when I was single. Even when I wasn't serious about a steady girlfriend, I could barely face her after seeing someone else.

If I felt so bad when I was uncommitted, I can't see myself now being faithless, then coming home, without dying of shame. My wife and I

share the bundle of big and little intimacies that make up our life together — making love when we get the chance, understanding unspoken signals, saying "I love you" and meaning it, teaching our 2-year-old "Star Light, Star Bright," sharing the successes and frustrations of our work, trading our standing jokes and our standing arguments. If I violated any of this I'd feel as if "Cheater" were etched across my teeth every time I tried to force a smile. Avoiding that distress is a powerful emotional check on infidelity.

And yet, I'm still drawn to someone who seems special. Sometimes speculation moves beyond the idle and banter beyond flirting. There it is on the horizon and moving closer: involvement. But you can tell when the person and the setting and the moment for an affair are nearing coincidence. Maneuvering is fun, like walking along the edge of a cliff. The contemplation is thrilling, the prospect is daunting, the leap might be liberating, the consequences disastrous. Better to step back in the end. Better to step back early on.

On the other hand, maybe my reasons are more practical. For one thing, who has the time? We go flat out all week with kids, work, meetings and chores from 6:30 in the morning until 11 at night, when we crash for a half-hour of reading and talking. I couldn't squeeze in any extracurricular activity even if I wanted to. Then, too, being born 10 years too soon to be caught in the herpes scare is a relief. Why risk the security that comes with being married and monogamous?

It could be I'm just slowing down. I can still remember some driving moves to the hoop playing basketball in my 20's; now I settle for midrange jump shots. Does the hankering settle too? I didn't find any substance to the seven-year-itch business; year seven wasn't much different from year one. But maybe it happens so gradually that it's not noticed.

Maybe, too, all this is an exercise in reverse braggadocio, a responsible adult's version of locker-room disclosures. From appearances, most of my men friends are unperturbably faithful. Am I the only one who gives it a thought? Hell, maybe their wives are doing it. Maybe my wife is. She has all the temptations I do, and being

beautiful, smart, sexy and funny, she's more eagerly sought. Kidding each other about conquests is one of our inside jokes; who knows for sure when there might be something to it? Maybe many older men who felt in their late 30's as I do now are smiling and saying "Sonny, just you wait." For my part, I can't see why the next seven years should be any different, either for happiness in marriage or opportunities outside of marriage, than the last seven, and I made it through them.

In the end, the surprise at being faithful is topped by another surprise: it's the very ambivalence that makes fidelity and marriage work. That tension means we're not taking each other for granted; we're sticking together, it's notwithstanding. It boils down to feeling special, not just that my wife loves only me, but that this vulnerability of mine belongs only to her. The surprise is on the Desperado: he came down from his fences and let himself love somebody. I may wistfully rue the opportunities missed, but I'll have a deeper satisfaction, and at bottom, I think, a supreme excitement, in the love we share. Will it stay like this? I hope so. ■



Blocked due to copyright.  
See full page image or  
microfilm.