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Article abstract

Linked by a series of idiomatic expressions used to describe sadness, loss and love, "Cross My Heart" is a lyric essay delving into the world of journaling bad decisions and broken relationships. A deep and private self appears in diaries; intense curiosity makes resisting the off-limit contents of the confidential accounts difficult for the author. In her search for understanding her place in the life, mind and heart of another, unwanted discoveries ensue. Her father, a constant source of emotional strength and support, offers inadequate advice.

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Keywords: Matters of the heart, Italian fathers, anxiety disorders, diaries, regrets

I had a Sicilian boss who was fond of saying, “People have so many regrets, but I only have two. One: I didn’t keep up with piano lessons, and the other—never went skydiving. Always wanted to, but now I’m too old.”

“Two regrets, really? That’s it?” I would ask while sorting through office mail, mostly unpaid invoices.

A choice that wasn’t on his list: the affair that ended his twenty-year marriage, leading to his perpetual state of near bankruptcy and creating a subcategory of company bookkeeping that was more creative writing than math. He fancied himself another ate-it-up and spit-it-out type like Sinatra. He and Ol’ Blue Eyes were kindred spirits.

He never expanded his list of disappointments; mine is a work in progress.

Regrets: I’ve had more than a few, definitely more than I’d care to mention. High on my list is reading my second ex-husband’s journal. I didn’t know I was capable of such a thing. But I’m getting ahead of myself. He was just my boyfriend then.

Bare One’s Heart

At eleven, I was given a thick square journal with a lock and key that had an image of Garfield the cat on the cover. The catch on the lock

could have been opened with a bobby pin, yet I still felt thrilled about a private place to record my thoughts and feelings. I recorded one major crush. A few paltry sentences sans flair. Abandoned to become a kitschy dust catcher on my bookshelf, that first diary gave no indication of how many notebooks I would later fill.

Lose Heart

When I turned nineteen, I received a bright red hardcover book with beautifully lined pages from a friend. My first entry was about how excited I was to have a diary again. I swore fidelity and imagined myself producing page after page of profound realizations and great memories.

That's not how the writing went. The shadow side of my psyche emerged; everything I felt miserable about went into that red diary. I didn't notice at first, but after a few years recording my routine life, I realized there were giant stretches of unreported time.

Perhaps I was outside, frolicking through fields of daisies, being cheerful. Indoors and inside, I was a seething mass of sadness. Scattered throughout the book was a list of my multiple insecurities, my many fears, every anxiety I was prey to, and all the awkward moments of my life were autopsied. Rarely did I write about the good times. Mostly, I just lived those.

But it bothered me, this habit of only writing through the worst. When my therapist suggested I start a gratitude journal, I asked, "I've got an attitude one. Can we work with that?"

Heavy Heart

My ex-boyfriend, Malcolm, once read my private pages, scanning sections of my diary, searching for his name. He revealed his furtive reading by asking what a certain Italian word meant.

"It means 'chubby,'" I told him. "Why? And where did you—"

The look on his face told me everything. He'd come across the word in my diary, in an entry where I had recorded my mother's reaction to a photo of us I had sent home.

"He's too chubby," my mother, a southern Italian immigrant, had said over the phone. "And his beard is hiding something. He's probably been married before. Watch out."

"You read my diary?" I asked. "YOU.READ.MY.DIARY?"

His behaviour should have been a warning that the relationship was doomed, but I felt tremendous guilt for committing those words to the page, for having written down something disparaging that could be

easily discovered. (Let's call this regret #37.) Around the time we were breaking up—which meant getting divorced (regrets #38 through to #45), he'd also read some of my personal mail.

He argued that it was the only way he could find out what I was thinking. That he needed to know what I was telling my friends about our unstable marriage.

That he didn't trust I was being honest with him.

That he was simply trying to protect himself.

Faint of Heart

Years later, I was living with a different boyfriend, Tom, and all this was in the back of my mind when I noticed his journal, nonchalantly leaning against a pile of books on a shelf, looking like it had nothing to hide. As if it were one of those free, alternative weekly newspapers that you can pick up on any street corner to check out concerts and events.

Tom had just moved in with me; we'd been living together for a month. (Which brings me to regret #59.) We'd had an argument the week before. I told him I didn't trust—there's that word again—that he felt about me the way I felt about him. I didn't use the word love and I talked in the abstract. Things had been tense between us since the conversation when I told him moving in together was a terrible idea: it was too soon. I wasn't ready to give up my hard-won freedom and tiny oasis. But he'd moved across the country to be with me, and vacancy was low and rental rates were high and that pretty much settled that, except it didn't.

I expected him to say something along the lines of 'it takes time to trust' and 'it's something we'll build together.' Instead, I got an angry reply, "What more can I do?"

"Nothing," I said.

It was true, he could do nothing to ease my anxiety; his journal would have to do the job. He was working late that night. I was home alone: just me, the journal and my neuroses.

I inched toward the book as if there were a hidden camera in the apartment capturing every move. My tell-tale heart was pounding Poe-like with dread. I wanted to stop myself; I knew I would be filled with self-loathing and disgust. I also knew I would probably reveal what I had done. I'm funny that way.

In a Heartbeat

I stood beside the shelf for a minute without moving, stock-still like a hunter in the bush after he's spotted his next meal.

Then I moved fast, flipping the journal open, whipping past dates until I found a current entry. I froze when I saw my name. And then I read. He was unhappy and it was my fault. He found me exasperating; I was annoying and difficult. He planned to regroup temporarily, gather his resources and move on, as soon as he could.

My throat constricted, my breath grew short and spastic. I wheezed like someone having an asthma attack. It was a list of my worst worries, my biggest fears, a description of my least favourable qualities seen through his critical gaze.

I cried and cried and then I called my father. I told him about what I had done, what I'd read in Tom's journal, leaving out the specific cutting details. If there was anyone who knew how difficult and annoying I could be, it was my dad.

My father is a generous soul who gives everyone the benefit of the doubt. He said, "Some things are not good to know." My dad had spent his lifetime trying to make an abysmal arranged marriage to my mentally ill mother work: he was diplomatic to a fault. When I was younger and questioned why he was staying in an abusive relationship, he explained, "Better to know this devil than the one I never met."

"What should I do?" I asked.

"Talk to him. Tell him the truth. Hear what he has to say."

I called Tom at work, thinking it was best not to spring the news on the guy at midnight, roughly the time he would arrive home after his late shift ended.

He was furious at the betrayal: "I can't believe you did that." His voice was tight. He couldn't really talk, he said, there were co-workers nearby. "We'll discuss it when I get home."

I spent the next three hours stressing, wondering how his punishment would fit my crime. He might insist on reading my journal; it was no glowing review of his performance as a boyfriend. He might give me the silent treatment, but that was what led me to read his journal in the first place. He might move out and we could end it. I prepared myself for that possibility.

I heard his key in the lock and sat up in bed, apologizing again before he'd even removed his jacket. I was horrified by what I had done.

He was angry but didn't want to break up. "I realized after I wrote what I wrote that I might have something to do with your being stressed out," he said.

"Too bad you didn't write that down," I said.

With a Sinking Heart

David Sedaris once said in an interview, "If you read somebody's diary, you get what you deserve." I'm still not sure what I deserved. What I got was several more years of off-and-on affection (his), deep-rooted anger (mine), and eventually, a second divorce (ours). It's all fodder for the regret list. Snooping, it turns out, is better left to characters like Sherlock Holmes or hardboiled private eyes like Philip Marlowe. I don't have the stomach for it.

The Heart of the Matter

I wonder sometimes about my misguided attempt for intimacy and truth, that overwhelming desire I felt for connection and communion, and the twisted hope I had that my transgression would build a more honest relationship.

I grew up in a small family. Often it was simply me and my parents keeping each other company—my mother's schizophrenia, my father's melancholy, and my anxiety, shrank our world. After thirty-six years of acrimony, my parents finally divorced. My dad now spends days marinating in peace and quiet, no longer a victim of my mother's violent tirades or physical attacks. I look exactly like my father would look if he were a woman—only thirty years younger and five inches shorter, with a better waistline.

This is what I think when I lie awake at night: my parents had no choice in their unhappy union and I chose both of mine.

My dad describes my divorced state by saying I threw myself into a ditch twice and then climbed back out.

My father remains firm in the belief that what you don't know won't hurt you. "The curious cat dies" is one of his many mangled idioms. Even though my parents' relationship went supernova, my dad remains convinced a successful marriage is possible.

"Especially," he emphasizes, "if it's between a deaf husband and a blind wife."