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Cheating Hearts

By Laura Saari / Illustration by Robert Dale

Private investigators are staffing up for a predictable February ritual: a spike in snooping. When it comes to marital surveillances, Valentine's Day remains the private eye payday of the year.

This year, the business got a small push from one of O.C.'s own, Tiger Woods. I don't know how you felt, but I just wanted the revelations to stop. It just got too sad. Because catching cheaters, however titillating, means a family is falling apart.

Newport Beach private investigator Tom Martin knows the dark side of the day of hearts and flowers better than most. He usually gets 10 to 15 clients a week. In past Februaries, though, he has served as many as 25 in a single day. At Martin Investigative Services, that means extra staff, as well as additional video and digital cameras for the cars, not to mention additional secretaries to type up reports.

"Everybody knows it's the best time to catch a [cheating] mate. It's like shooting fish in a barrel," says Martin, whose company has been doing surveillance work for more than 30 years. "If you're having an affair, you almost 100 percent have to be with that one person on Valentine's Day. Both parties expect it."

He says women are more likely than men to ask for a special date on that day. "The man doesn't care if he gets laid on a Tuesday, a Wednesday, on Christmas, on Valentine's Day. But the women are in it for emotional reasons—they don't just want sushi at lunchtime. They want to have the nice dinner, the drinks—then go to the hotel and knock it out. The problem for the married ones is: How do they figure out dinner and an evening out with their spouse and someone else?"

I went on surveillance with Martin years ago, a crazy adrenaline ride that took us from a Carl's Jr. in Irvine,



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following a blonde with a vanity plate bearing the word "hot," all the way to the door of a room at a La Quinta Inn. That knock on the hotel room door was like something out of an old detective movie. What I remember most is the flash when the guy opened the door. I'm not talking about the camera. The guy had only a towel around his waist, and his body looked so pale.

The pinhole cameras, the grainy pictures of couples sharing illicit kisses in dimly lit restaurant booths, the journals detailing travels from workplace to restaurant to midpriced motel. In the Information Age, the work of the gumshoe seems quaintly old-fashioned.

Martin says the Internet makes his business easier because most cheaters leave "an unbelievable trail." And yet, for many spouses, e-mail evidence is not enough.

"Most people still want the same thing they wanted in the '60s, the '70s, the '80s," Martin says. "They want The Photograph. We give them their finality."

He has handled many high-profile cases. I accompanied him several years ago to follow a swarthy gigolo. He was a fake golf pro who picked up women while driving down Coast Highway in a Porsche convertible. The guy ended up in the slammer, and the case ended up as a TV movie. Martin also has followed a few ballplayers and celebrities, including one athlete and his girlfriend who Martin filmed in a car in the Angel Stadium parking lot.

Some stakeouts take his investigators on wild rides, crossing state lines, racing to board planes, switching destinations suddenly. He recalls a "single-name rock star" who ditched Martin's three investigators by disappearing out the driveway of a Beverly Hills hotel in a line-up of five black Suburbans. The SUVs headed off in five directions.

Last summer, he followed "a world-class business person, very well known" after his wife reported finding suspicious things in his briefcase. The man, who was in his early 40s, started the day in an Irvine hotel with one woman at 9:30 a.m., met another in Newport Beach before noon, had lunch with a third date in Glendale, then went to Los Angeles and met another in a room at 4 p.m. He then went home, changed clothes, and drove to the Westin Bonaventure in Los Angeles for another assignation. What was in his briefcase that made his wife suspicious?

Viagra, Cialis, and condoms.

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On a brighter note, a toast to Cupid: Divorce is down. Wishful thinkers say the drop represents a return to traditional values. A recent study, and the view from a private eye's lens on Valentine's Day, suggest otherwise.

The National Marriage Project, a study done by researchers at the University of Virginia, has declared that the bad economy has made many couples rethink divorce. "It's as simple as two roofs," says Martin. "If you can't afford two roofs, you stay under the one you've got."

Martin sees plenty of evidence to support that conclusion. Typically, he says, his male clients divorce their wives if they catch them cheating. But among his female clients—who hire him most often to do surveillances—one-third get divorced, one-third hang in there and go to counseling, and one-third "don't know what to do."

In the last year, Martin says, more of his clients have decided to stay in the marriage even after being presented with tawdry evidence of infidelity.

"She comes back to me after the surveillance to do the asset searches, and I have to tell her, 'Your \$10 million house is worth \$7 million, your cars are leased, your [credit] cards are maxed out.' The vast majority of these women out there hitting their tennis balls and shopping at Nordstrom—they have no idea," says Martin. "Let's talk about the houses, the cars, the banks, the 401Ks ... a lot of these people are so sideways now that it makes no sense to get a divorce. They're basically stuck."

So, this year at least, cheaters who might have gotten the boot are more likely to be accepted back into the family fold, however unhappily ever after.

Maybe one of those traditional values is forgiveness.

Laura Saari is an Orange Coast contributing editor.

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