



I SPY

Checking his E-mail? Donning a disguise and following him to work? Paying a friend he's never met to hit on him at a club to see if he takes the bait? Sisters who snoop discover that a little information can sometimes be a dangerous thing. In fact, you may find out more about yourself than your man BY JEANNINE AMBER

It started the way these stories always do: There was this guy.

He was affectionate, then absent, fantastic, then awful. We dated for nine months until all we did was fight. When it was over he wouldn't even speak to me. It drove me crazy. I couldn't stop thinking about him. What was he doing? Was he having fun? Was he missing me? Did he want me back? I wanted to believe he was miserable and I wasn't the only one suffering. Not knowing how he felt was making me insane. I was sure if I could get some indication, even just a clue, I would calm right down.

So one day when he wasn't home (which I happened to know because he worked right down the hall from me), I tried dialing into his answering machine. It didn't take long. Sitting at my desk, hitting the pound button, I methodically punched in >

PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS BY C J BURTON

reader confession:

“About a month after I started checking my man’s voice mail, a woman called and told me to drop dead. I recognized her voice from my man’s voice mail messages and realized we were both snooping on the same guy!”—Gillian, 26

numbers trying to get his password right. I tried his name, his birthday, his address—nothing. Then it struck me: He’d use something simple. I punched in 7777 and heard the shaky *buzzzzz* of the tape rewinding. I sucked in my breath as the messages started to play. His mother *beep*... his sister *beep*—my heart was racing—his best friend *beep*. No one said anything much except, “Hey, it’s me. Blah, blah, blah. Call back.” Even so, my hands were shaking as I hung up the phone. This felt nothing like calm.

Snooping has such horrible connotations. It’s a violation of trust, thievery of the most intimate kind. And yet almost every Black woman I know has done it. One friend confessed to reading her teenage son’s journal (just to make sure he was keeping out of trouble), and another told me she’d sneaked peeks at her boss’s paycheck (just to see how much she’s worth). One of my closest friends, a reporter, used the database at her job to track down the contact information for an ex-boyfriend’s current wife. “I even found out her salary,” Simone says with a shrug. “He was married when we met, but he was so slick, never giving me any information about himself. It makes me sick to remember how I let him run the show. It gave me strength just to know that if I wanted to, I could call his wife and make a scene.” Simone never did make that call, but she confesses she fantasized about it all the time.

“Feeling powerless is often at the root of snooping,” says Veronique Thompson, a therapist in Berkeley, California. She suggests that Black women, who may be subjected to sexism and racism daily, are potentially more susceptible to those feelings. We’re even more prone to snooping if we come from fractured families or if our trust has been skewed in the past through a partner’s infidelity. Without ever analyzing what we’re doing, we may develop unhealthy coping mechanisms—like compulsive snooping—that give us a temporary sense of control.

Talk to any woman who snoops, and you’ll find the same thing: the need to feel secure. We want to know that our kids are okay, that we’re valued at work, that we won’t be hurt by our relationships, that we have the upper hand. We want to know that our ex-boyfriend is miserable, and our current boyfriend is true. We want to know that nothing is wrong and everything is right, and we become convinced that the best way to figure this out is through some missing piece of information that we just don’t have—yet.

Therapist Thompson points out that the impulse that leads

DESPERATELY SEEKING SATISFACTION

“I swear I wasn’t thinking about snooping,” insists my friend Skye, defending her decision to dig around in her ex-boyfriend’s

underwear drawer. “It was more casual, like, *I wonder what’s going on in there.*” To her surprise, underneath the boxers, Skye found almost a dozen photographs of half-dressed women posed on her boyfriend’s bed. “When he came back in the room, I held them out like a deck of cards,” she says. “I was like, ‘What the hell is this?’ ” Her boyfriend called her psycho. He swore the pictures were (a) taken before they were together, (b) not his, (c) planted by someone. In her heart Skye knew he was lying—wasn’t that the football-shaped clock she’d given him right there in the photos? But she didn’t have the confidence to walk away. She thought she’d never find someone else who wanted to be with her.

It took nearly a year and another major investigation involving breaking into her boyfriend’s dorm room at 3:30 A.M. and finding him passed out and naked on his waterbed with a woman she knew before Skye finally got out.

“My mother was in a horrible marriage with my stepfather for 26 years,” Skye now reflects. “Looking back I see that I also stay in relationships way too long. It’s like history repeating itself.” It didn’t help that there was a lot of secrecy in her childhood home. “My mother never told me who my biological father was,” she says. “I remember

searching through her things looking for my birth certificate. I always assumed that if you wanted to know the truth, you had to get it through espionage. But I only figured out recently how my upbringing affected my relationship with men.” She pauses. “Like, yesterday.”

Skye held tight to her suitcase full of childhood issues, carting them from one boyfriend to the next. A few months after the waterbed incident, she started dating, and snooping on, Roger. “We were together eight years,” she says. “I snooped the whole time. In the beginning I did a lot of checking of the phone bill. I would cross-reference dates, like, *The eighteenth, that was Thursday. Wait a second—he told me he was at a work function.* If I saw a number being called late at night, I’d check the next bill to see if it was still there. I developed a photographic memory.” As time went on, Skye’s snooping advanced with the technology. She figured out the password for Roger’s voice mail, checked his E-mails, read his instant messages, and finally caught him chatting on an online dating site. She didn’t confront him because she was afraid he’d change his passwords. “Then I’d have no way of knowing what was really going on,” she says matter-of-factly. True to her pattern, it was several months more before she broke up with him.

Therapist Thompson points out that the impulse that leads

essence.com reader poll

80% of you say you’ve snooped on your man.

reader confession:

“After we broke up, my ex installed spyware on my computer. I’d just sent my girlfriend a totally graphic E-mail about my first post-break up sexual experience. Serves him right.” —Pearl, 33



some women to spy—the desire for clarity and resolution—is normal, even healthy. The problem is that snooping rarely quells those murky feelings of doubt. Indeed, most of the time it makes them stronger. “Snooping is very seductive,” she says. “It whispers, ‘Come. Look. You’ll find the answer.’ But the idea that getting the answer will reassure you and calm you down is a fantasy.”

Chances are, if you discover you really do have a reason to be suspicious, you’ll only feel more insecure. Why is he cheating on me? What’s wrong with me? Why am I not good enough? Ironically, that insecurity, now heightened, is exactly what keeps some women from walking out of the relationship even after it’s clear that it has run its course. “The more I snooped, the more I felt as if I didn’t deserve anyone better,” says Skye. “I would think, *How can I find someone else if I can’t even hold this one down?*”

essence.com reader poll

45% of you prefer to play back his voice mail or spy on his caller ID, while 29% of you are likely to go through his pockets or his car’s glove compartment.

surveillance cameras disguised as clock radios, digital recorders that will tape up to 45 hours of phone conversations, and a battery-operated “voice changer” in case you want to disguise your voice and make a few undercover calls of your own. “This is a massive industry,” Fairley says. “People who think they’re being cheated on want irrefutable proof.”

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE?

There is almost always pain and anguish involved in snooping on a partner, but that’s not to say snooping never has a place. If you think you’re being cheated on, there is the very real possibility of contracting an STD to consider. And just as important, but perhaps not as concrete, is the need for self-validation. Say you have a strong suspicion that your man’s up to no good. You confront him and he tells you you’re *wrong, wrong, wrong!* Then what?

“Having your intuition denied, especially when you feel in your gut that something’s going on, is really crazy-making,” says Bob Huizenga, a therapist and infidelity coach who counsels people through the discovery of and recovery from affairs via his Web site break-free-from-the-affair.com. “People need to know that their intuition is accurate. They need validation.” If you think your partner is lying to you, says Huizenga, sometimes the only way to find out the truth is to spy. And if you are so inclined, there is a multimillion-dollar Web-based industry just waiting to support you.

“You don’t need a private investigator anymore; you can really do it yourself,” says David Fairley, owner of catchcheaters.com, a Web site devoted to helping people detect affairs. The site offers support in the aftermath, hosts message boards where people can share their tales of woe, and provides links to marriage counselors and divorce lawyers. For sale on Fairley’s site are computer programs that allow you to track every keystroke your partner makes and every Web site he visits. There are

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reader confession:

“I once found an entry my boyfriend wrote in his journal about a trip he’d taken to Miami with some friends. It said, ‘I f---ed many hos.’ I had never heard him talk that way. We broke up a few weeks later.” —Simone, 32

on his report that does not belong to him.

What they did: “We already requested an investigation into Norris’s report. I will also closely monitor both our credit reports every six months,” Trenise says. “The general rule is that a credit grantor looks at the last 12 months of activity, length of employment and balances,” says Stalling. —WENDY L. WILSON □

If you missed Step 1 in the June 2006 issue, go to essence.com and join the ESSENCE Home Ownership Campaign.

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But as dogged as some women are in their pursuit of proof, they search and search and still come up empty-handed. You’d think they’d be happy, but it turns out that finding nothing can be just as stressful.

Sondra wasn’t looking for a boyfriend when she met Charles, a trainer at her gym. She’d recently gotten out of a 13-year on-again, off-again relationship with a chronic cheater who had done the unthinkable: fathered a child with

another woman. Sondra insisted she was through with men, but Charles kept at her, and eventually the two started to date.

Almost immediately Sondra got the feeling this man was too good to be true. He was attentive, caring and always available. But one night he didn’t answer his phone. Then he announced he was going to the club, which wasn’t like him. For Sondra, that was all it took. “I was sure something was going on,” she says. So she figured out his password and started listening to his voice messages. At first it was just once in a while, but it quickly got out of hand. “I was checking his voice mail at least six times a day,” she says. “He could be sitting right next to me, and I’d be calling his machine. I didn’t even check my own phone as much as I checked his.”

Sondra says most of the time all she heard were people trying to set up training sessions. “But I thought, *Oh, that’s how I met him*. So I’d call back thinking there’d be more.” This went on for a year, and not once did Sondra hear something that suggested her boyfriend was doing anything other than working hard and loving her. “I wanted to stop,” she says, “but I just

reader confession:

“I hid a mini voice-activated tape recorder under our bed. Sure enough, I heard my lover, now my ex, having all these conversations with women. He even brought one woman to our house!”—Jane, 34

couldn’t. It was taking over my life.”

Sondra talked to her girlfriends, prayed, and finally confessed to Charles. “He was mad,” she says, “but he also kept telling me that he wanted me to be comfortable. He said if I needed to snoop, then that was up to me; he had nothing to hide. I was so afraid of getting hurt again I couldn’t stop looking for something. But it turns out he really, really loves me.” Five years later, Sondra and Charles are still together.

SLOWING DOWN THE TRAIN TO CRAZY TOWN

I want to say that I came to my senses the first time I heard the buzz of my ex’s answering machine. But that’s not the way it ended. Within a week I was dialing in almost every day. He was in a new relationship, and when they weren’t getting along, she’d leave a string [CONTINUED ON PAGE 203]

of nagging messages: “I called you two minutes ago. Where are you?” “I called you five minutes ago. Where are you?” Then the two of them would make up, and she’d leave messages like, “Oh, baby! My flight gets in at 3:00. Pick me up at the airport. I can’t wait to see you.” I’d be so incensed by her giddiness that I’d hit delete and erase her messages, invariably prompting new messages: “I’m at the airport. Where the hell are you? I AM SO MAD AT YOU!” And I’d feel better again.

But eventually, listening and meddling just weren’t enough. So I got her phone number the old-fashioned way: She was listed. One night I called her, with my best friend on the other line, just to hear her voice, just because I could. She picked up the phone. It was 2:00 A.M. “Hello?” she said.

I started to giggle.

“Hellooo,” my friend on the other line replied in a ridiculous fake Jamaican accent. “Is Joel there?”

She hung up on us. A minute later, my ex-boyfriend called me back. He yelled at me. Said I was harassing his girlfriend. I denied and denied and denied, but I know he didn’t believe me. The man I wanted to miss me thought I was a fool.

There’s a fine line between validating your

intuition and losing your dignity. I’m not sure what kind of woman it takes not to cross that line, but I know it’s not me. Of course, not everyone who snoops careens headfirst into humiliation. I know one woman who checked her man’s E-mail a total of two times, didn’t like what she found, and dumped him. “Snooping just took me to a really ugly place,” she says, her head held high. “I would never do it again.”

But for most of us regular women, we snoop once, just to see what’s up, and then we’re like a runaway train. Hiding outside his apartment, in the bushes, in the rain, just to see what time he comes home (yes, that was me). Snooping begets snooping. And unless you’re going to act on the information in a positive, decisive, self-affirming way (like getting out, moving on, or going to therapy), it amounts to nothing more than self-torture.

This is the part of the story where I’m supposed to tell you I learned my lesson and I’ll never do it again. Like Skye who says she’s sworn off it for good. Or Sondra who insists it’s all in her past. On the other hand, Simone, my reporter friend, laughs when I call to ask if she’s changed her ways. “Why

reader confession:

“I was convinced that all men cheat. Then I checked my current guy’s E-mail, and there was nothing but some totally innocuous E-mails to his homies. Either he’s the best cheater in the world, or I’ve been totally wrong about men.”—Marly, 31

would I stop?” she says. “The stuff you find is fascinating.” And then she starts to gloat over some new information she just dug up.

“What is it?” I ask.

“A photograph embedded in an internal memo from where she works,” she says.

“You found a picture of your ex’s wife?”

“No, better,” she says, bubbling with excitement. “I found a picture of your ex’s wife. Do you want me to E-mail it to you? She’s totally not cute.”

I think this over for a good long time.

“It’s tempting,” I say at last, “but I think I’ll pass.” □

Jeannine Amber is a senior writer for this magazine.

Subjects’ names and identifying details have been changed.