

an *Affair* to Forget

a true story

marie opperman

an Affair to Forget

a true story

an Affair to Forget

a true story

marie opperman



Published by Zebra Press,
an imprint of Random House Struik (Pty) Ltd
Company Reg. No. 1966/003153/07
80 McKenzie Street, Cape Town, 8001
PO Box 1144, Cape Town, 8000, South Africa

www.zebrapress.co.za

First published 2010

Publication © Zebra Press 2010

Text © Marie Opperman 2010

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise,
without the prior written permission of the copyright owners.

PUBLISHER: Marlene Fryer
MANAGING EDITOR: Ronel Richter-Herbert
PROOFREADER: Beth Housdon
COVER DESIGNER: Monique Oberholzer
TEXT DESIGNER: Sean Robertson
TYPESETTER: Monique van den Berg
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Valerie Kömmer

ISBN 978 1 77020 040 1 (Print)

ISBN 978 1 77022 112 3 (ePub)

ISBN 978 1 77022 113 0 (Pdf)

CONTENTS



| | |
|---|-----|
| Acknowledgements | vii |
| Preface | ix |
| | |
| <i>1</i> Xena: Warrior Princess | 1 |
| <i>2</i> <i>Can i phone y</i> | 9 |
| <i>3</i> Xena: Super Sleuth | 27 |
| <i>4</i> Pieter Odendaal, Piet and Piet O | 45 |
| <i>5</i> Right things, right people, right time | 65 |
| <i>6</i> Worn sea glass | 79 |
| <i>7</i> Emotional affairs | 95 |
| <i>8</i> Desert music | 109 |
| <i>9</i> Plunger on my forehead | 127 |
| <i>10</i> Ancient ritual | 143 |
| <i>11</i> Xena: Timid Mouse | 155 |
| <i>12</i> Xmas mince pies | 171 |
| <i>13</i> Botox | 187 |
| <i>14</i> Wise words | 203 |
| <i>15</i> Men in skirts | 211 |
| <i>16</i> Buffalo mozzarella | 219 |
| <i>17</i> Xena: The Victorious | 233 |
| | |
| Song list | 245 |
| Contact list | 247 |
| References | 249 |



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A heartfelt thank you to my daughters Mia and Sylvi, for their love, loyalty, support, good times, wine, chocolate and music.

To everybody whose lives have been touched by affairs, and those who shared their experiences so openly with me.

To healers and clairvoyants of all kinds, other airy-fairies and dear ones, for wisdom, insight, healing and friendship.

And to Chips and Enos, without whose affair I could not have written this book.



PREFACE

ON A SATURDAY MORNING early in the spring of 2009, I found an SMS from a woman on my husband's cellphone. By then the two of them had been involved in an intense affair for at least a year.

My whole life as I knew it up to that point was destroyed in a heartbeat. Instead of someone who, up till then, had watered the garden quite happily, I turned into a person who literally went mad from pain. Instead of seeing the man I had loved and trusted with my whole heart, I now saw only a stranger who had betrayed me. Instead of the dream I'd had about growing old with my husband, I now had questions: Should I divorce him? Would I ever trust and love him again? Would I ever be able to forgive him?

What do you do when you find out that your husband is having an affair? Why did he cheat on you? I, who have had affairs myself and thought that I was finished with them, now had to face this terrible thing that brings so much pain and destruction. I, who had done this to other women, now had to make sense out of it for myself.

With my husband's affair, I embarked on a life journey during which I searched for answers; I did stupid, crazy things; I started to search for lessons to learn; and hopefully I became a little wiser and better. I searched for the gift that was hidden in my pain, and I found it. I spoke to many people, from therapists to clairvoyants. I participated in an ancient shamanistic ritual, received hypnotherapy and questioned my spirit guides.

This book is my candid account of this journey, from the moment when everything started crumbling inside and around me, to the day when I was able to decide whether I was going to stay with my husband or not.

I discovered that the lives of many of us are touched by affairs. To try to understand why we have affairs, and how we handle them, and what they do to us, I spoke to many people. Their stories also appear in this book.

I have learnt that we are all human; we all make mistakes; we hurt others and we are hurt in turn. And all that we really want is to be happy.

XENA: WARRIOR PRINCESS

24 October

IF THIS ISN'T A GOOD SIGN, I don't know what is. The object lies right in front of my feet on the beach on a busy Saturday morning, next to a woman with dark hair and a fishing rod, her pair of pink bathroom slippers tossed carelessly in the sand.

It glistens; it is dark; it is huge. It is probably ancient. It looks alien, as if it belongs on another planet. Maybe it's from Atlantis. What unknown forces have teamed up to toss this object from the murky depths of the Indian Ocean right at my feet?

It's a good omen to find it on this crowded beach. Or, at least, I hope it's a good omen. Because a positive sign is just what I need, seeing that I am now a woman whose husband is – or allegedly was, but probably still is – having an affair. To survive this, I need all the luck and good omens I can get.

I bend down to pick it up, bottom in the air, beach towel trailing behind me in the rippling baby waves. It is the biggest and weirdest cowry shell that I've ever found on a beach. Black and shiny, with brown speckles on its scarred top and pitted deeply on its

bottom, it looks as if it had been stuck between rocks for years, only to roll out of the waves to become mine at this moment.

I had wanted a cowry so badly as a good-luck sign. ‘Please, please,’ I had pleaded superstitiously with whoever was in charge of these things as I walked on a beach seemingly devoid of these pretty, round-backed shells. ‘Please, let me pick up a cowry. Then I’ll know that everything will be all right, just as Bob Marley sings in his song.’

I brush the sand off the underside that is beautifully trimmed with fine dark stripes. ‘Thank you, Pachamama,’ I say, thanking Mother Earth for her gift. And then, just to make sure I am doing the right thing, I place my hands in front of my chest, palms together, fingers facing up, and give a little namaste bow in the direction of Mother Ocean. ‘Thank you, thank you.’ Then I giggle. What a cheek. Who am I? This is the mighty ocean!

That I’m speaking out loud, like a lunatic, to whichever mothers or goddesses might be present doesn’t bother me one bit – I’ve been talking to myself on this beach for the past week.

I’ve also walked in my bathing costume with my sarong draped across my neck like a scarf, as if cellulite were a mere figment of humankind’s imagination; something that never existed.

I’ve swum, exuberant, in drizzling rain in the company of complete strangers, one of whom was a woman wearing a straw hat as she bobbed in the waves.

I’ve told polite, baffled women walking their dogs that my husband is having an affair, or had one; whatever, it doesn’t matter – the facts I would soon find out.

I’ve walked in pelting rain on a beach as lonely as the moon, rivulets of water rushing down the rocks around me, water dripping from my bathing costume and my nose. Singing with all my heart: *I’ll do my crying in the rain ... you won’t know the rain from the tears in my eyes ...*

Songs have risen inside me, like music scores from romantic movies. *Pearly sheeeellls from the oceeeaaan*, I have sung a bit off-key, nostalgically, giving the words a dramatic twang. *On a day like today, we passed the time away, writing love letters in the saaand ...*

Mostly I've talked, out loud: to myself, to people who haven't been there – to him, to her. 'How could you do it?' I've kept asking him. 'I can't believe what you did.'

'I am so angry,' I've said to them both. To them, and to me, equally: 'You stupid, stupid, stupid, *stupid!*'

I've done things that I would not have dreamt of doing before my status changed from that of happily married woman – or, rather, *supposedly* happily married woman – to that of woman whose husband was – is – having an affair.

Maybe I've gone a little mad, or *am* as mad as a hatter. Hopefully, it is only temporary.

I call my husband 'Chips' because he has something to do with a certain kind of agricultural produce. Okay, potatoes.

And I call his mistress 'Enos', because of an SMS she sent me, so crude that you shouldn't even try to guess the content.

I am Xena: Warrior Princess.

I have to be her; I have to fight this thing that has happened to me. This is why I also sing: *It makes me that much stronger, it makes me that much wiser, thanks for making me a fighter ...*

Xena and Chips and Enos.

Chips and Enos.

Enos and Chips.

And Xena: Warrior Princess.

I found out about their affair exactly one month and five days ago.

The moment that I knew, my emotions jumped into a little boat drifting right in the middle of a storm-lashed ocean, bobbing up and down, up and down. Pain was soon replaced by anger, by

shock and disbelief, by sadness, love, hate, indignation, vengefulness, loneliness. You name an emotion; I experienced it, one after the other.

I also found out that I wasn't the only person on the planet to have experienced these feelings. The lives of most people I told about Chips's affair have been touched in one way or another by affairs. Either they were cheating or they were cheated on, or they considered cheating or suspected that they were going to be cheated on.

I became a statistic in what one could call our national passion: Affairs. And I had thought it was rugby.

A few days ago I drove from my home in Randburg to Sheffield Beach on the KwaZulu-Natal North Coast. I needed time alone to think; I needed to be as angry and as sad as I wanted to be; to be free to cry and yell. To decide what I was going to do; to heal; to find hope for the future.

I need hope in order to survive. Music drifts through my head: *Some day when my crying's done, I'm gonna wear a smile and walk in the sun ...*

I rub the shiny black cowry shell. 'You are a good omen,' I say out loud, ignoring the stares of the women around me with husbands and dogs and children. 'You are a sign that I will get stronger, that I will heal, that only good will come from this.'

Because that is what I want: not bitterness, not resentment. Not even anger. What I want is to survive my husband's affair. To be as strong as Xena, and Ayla from *The Clan of the Cave Bear*. Fearless. Brave. Strong.

And to be as happy as the happiest character in folklore or the movies or the entire history of humankind; maybe as happy as Shrek's girlfriend Fiona when she found those sweet, blue, chirping birds' eggs in the first *Shrek* movie and fried them for breakfast.

But right now my chest is a witch's cauldron bubbling with anger and tears. My tongue is a whip with a life of its own, especially when I talk to Chips; more specifically when I talk about him and Enos.

I phone my cheating husband. Regularly.

'You've destroyed my faith in you, our marriage, our lives – and what for?' I rant. 'For a woman who can't even spell.'

'You must put this behind you,' he replies. 'Get on with your life, with or without me. You are only doing damage to yourself.'

'What? I have all the right in the world to be angry with you, to fight with you. I need to do that. I *have* to. It has only been a month since I found out about you and Enos. You've destroyed everything.'

A long silence from his side.

'Pathetic!' I yell.

My sadness lurks inside of me, creeping around the edges of my existence, wanting to take a hold of my life. It is both frightening and overwhelming, a thundering wave that will flatten and drown me in angry, raging water and sand if I don't suppress it.

It speaks in the music I listen to when I am alone: *If I lived till I was a hundred-and-two, I just don't think I'll ever get over you ...*

I take off my backpack, put it on a rock, unzip it and put the cowry shell inside with my other beach treasures. There are bits of sea glass, sandblasted to muted greens and dull whites. Mussel shells with tiny white shells stuck to them. Smooth, round black pebbles. Flat shells, a golden glow inside them; broken shells with curls and curves inscribed deep within. A brown-and-white feather, which I take to be a good sign of angelic oceanic activity, left on my path to bring me hope.

I turn around and walk back to my rented cottage, situated beneath an enormous milkwood tree with thick, twisting branches.

Exactly three months ago, Chips and I stayed here, on this beach. We strolled where I am walking now; we stayed in the same cottage. We talked: ‘What direction shall we walk in today? Do we turn to the left or the right ... Look at this tiny striped fish in this little rock pool. Isn’t he cute? Pose right there, I want to photograph you on the rocks ... if you stand here next to me, I’ll snap a picture of our feet together, next to these purple sea plants ...’

I uploaded that picture of our feet – my right little toe touching his left little toe – on my Facebook page. Proud: look what a wonderful time my equally wonderful husband and I are having at the beach.

I open the small wooden gate, turn on the shower under the tree and wash the sand off my feet. I unlock the front door. The bedroom has that breathless, expectant quiet that places get when they know their inhabitants are sad and lonely. I can hear the ocean’s silver waterfall song and the loud, explosive crash of waves against rocks.

The same grey cover with thin navy stripes covers the bed, just as it did when Chips and I were here. Then it was our bed; now it is mine, as are the memories that won’t desert me.

Your face dances and it haunts me; your laughter’s still ringing in my ears; I still find pieces of your presence here ...

We made love here once, on Father’s Day. ‘I am impotent,’ my husband told me, after our lovemaking dwindled and then stopped more than a year ago. On Father’s Day he made a miraculous recovery, but only for a very short time. The lovemaking left me feeling sad, unfulfilled.

My heart is empty, your eyes are dull ...

I gave him Hugo’s Elvis CD for Father’s Day, and a card with hearts on it, thanking him for being so good to us all. Enos prob-

ably also thanked him for his time, support and money. For what else did she thank him? When? How? Where?

About a month later, Chips and I returned to Sheffield Beach. We stayed in another cottage nearby, right on the beach. In the evenings we watched the moon glide over the ocean, red and heavy and full, drawing a wide silver path over rippling water.

Now I switch on the computer and study the pictures of Chips that I took then. Here he stands on a rock. Legs astride. Big smile. Two-toned khaki shirt. Beard. Glasses.

Where is his cellphone, that instrument of deceit? Did he leave it in the cottage? Did he switch it off? Was there a message from her when he switched it on again? Where was I when he replied to it?

How many SMSes did those fingers, curling innocently at his sides here in the picture, type to Enos on that cellphone in the past year?

Oh, I know.

898.

I counted them.

2

CAN I PHONE Y

19 September

IT STARTS WITH FOUR WORDS ON CHIPS'S cellphone screen.

This is how it starts for me, that is – not for them. By this stage Chips and Enos, with unbridled enthusiasm, have been extremely involved with each other for a least a year. Their emotional affair is well established, a huge success, and well on its way to heavy breathing and sex. That is to say, if it hasn't reached that stage already.

The words are in Afrikaans.

Kan e j bel

It's quite tricky to translate Enos's messages into English without losing their, shall we say, punch.

But this one's easy.

Can i phone y

These are the surprising and unexpected words in Chips's inbox while he is out of the country and I am in possession of his cellphone. There is only a cellphone number displayed above the message – no name. I don't know it yet, but this SMS is from

Enos. That she loves abbreviating words in her text messages I will find out later. An annoying habit, but it clearly saves her from the unpleasant task of learning how to spell.

The words on the screen give me the shivers. I am sure of one thing, as certain as I am standing here: This SMS means trouble. Big trouble.

The four words scream out all the well-practised deceit of an established love affair.

I know affairs. I've been there, done that. I just don't have the T-shirt – but I do have the divorce papers. Chips and I were both divorced when we met seven years ago. Both of us had been involved in affairs before; both of us had vowed to the high heavens that our days of deceit were over. An affair wasn't worth the heartache it caused; it killed your soul, we said.

And now this.

The day before, Chips had had to leave in a hurry on a business trip to Angola. 'Leave your cell with me and I'll take messages,' I'd suggested. At a cellphone shop, we had arranged for our extra SIM card to be activated for use in Angola, which Chips had then put into an old cellphone.

He later told me that he hadn't been able to use the old cellphone in Angola, as it wouldn't charge – even if he'd wanted to, he wouldn't have been able to phone Enos when he got there. But perhaps he hadn't wanted to phone her. I later found out that they'd had an argument shortly before his trip. They'd fought about sex. She wanted it; he didn't. His story.

I had driven Chips to the airport and we had had coffee before he boarded his flight. When he'd said goodbye to me, he'd embraced me, held me close. Told me he loved me. I'd believed him. Of course I'd believed him. Why wouldn't I? He was my husband – I loved him. I trusted him.

At home I'd felt sad and lonely for a while and had wandered forlornly through the house. But Chips often goes away for his work as a salesman and an installer of potato-washing-and-sorting machines, and I have learnt to keep myself busy. I'd gone into the garden, picked up our three dogs' considerable mess, talked to our six cats, watered the garden.

We'd bought a small house with a big garden and lovely trees in Randburg five years ago, when we were married. Both of us were already in our fifties. This marriage was the one that was going to last, we promised each other. This was our one shot at happiness, at being honest, at doing the right things. This was our chance – maybe our last chance – at a love that would work and endure.

We were married by a magistrate in Harrismith. 'Why do you want to get married?' he'd asked us.

'We are best friends,' Chips had beamed.

Our motto was that of people who have gone through the mill of love and know its pitfalls: If you have to hide something, you know it is wrong and you don't do it. Easy. Simple. The recipe for a happy marriage.

We were the happy two-cellphones-lying-next-to-each-other couple, because we had nothing to hide from one another. Or that was what I thought, without realising that our cellphones hadn't been lying side by side for a long time.

That is how much I trusted Chips.

After finishing in the garden, I go into our bedroom. I glance at Chips's cellphone and see that an SMS has been delivered. It's a novelty to have his cellphone with me, as it is usually more or less glued to his side. He wears it on his belt, or it lies on his bedside table, or in his bakkie. He even takes it into the bathroom with him.

I pick it up. Gingerly. Unaccustomed. I read the message, unsuspecting.

Kan e j bel – Can i phone u

It is this message that changes my life in an instant. In my bedroom, in front of my dressing table with my jewellery boxes and the crystal ball in which I never manage to divine anybody's future. It feels as if a tsunami has hit me with all its might, destroying my whole existence, sucking the life out of me.

I don't realise it yet, but precisely because this message destroys my life as I know it, it also leads me onto a new path, to a new life. It sets me on a personal journey that will be as painful as it will be enriching.

It is the first step on a path towards growth, self-development and self-analysis. It is this message from Enos that will force me to find aspects of myself that I never knew existed, or that I had forgotten about.

It turns me into the *Enterprise*, flagship of *Star Trek*, sending me on an exploration into unknown territories.

Number: +277150 ... (and so on; I can't really give you her cell number, can I?) Message: Kan e j bel

I look at my hands, caked with dried mud from the garden, our safe haven. They are shaking uncontrollably around the cellphone. Suddenly my mouth is as dry as it's never been, as if I am eating winter leaves.

I know, with a certainty as blinding as the sun, that nothing will ever be the same again between me and the man I love.

Without thinking, in total shock, I phone the number that is displayed above the message. The phone rings. A woman answers. Her voice sounds young and happy. I speak, my voice cracked and hoarse like that of an old man. 'This is Chips's wife. Who are you?'

Silence; deafening silence. She terminates the call.

I phone her again and again, over and over. Each time she ends the call without saying a word. Every time she does so, she

is telling me loud and clear: *I'm a betrayer; I'm betraying you with your husband; I was caught out; I don't know what to do.*

I also don't really know what to do. I send her an SMS, pretending to be Chips, who can't talk – because *I* am around, of course. I know how these things work.

Maybe she smells a rat – she suspects that I still have the cellphone, or that I am, indeed, around – she also knows how these things work – because she explains in detail:

D k e wou aanwys krx da wa grt ongeluk m reun se meisi ernst beseer ha nek gebreuk wil ha da kry maken ni di pad ni

Really, this is what she writes. Exactly. This is the woman with whom my husband is having an affair.

In English it reads something like: *Tnx i wnt directns thre w hge accident m ron 's gurl serous hurt he nek brouken wnt get he thre butnot know way*

Gebreuk? Nek? Brouken? Neck?

Doesn't one die when one's neck is gebreek/broken? Or can you survive a gebreukte/brouken neck?

Soon after:

D k reggekom

Thx cme rite

What is going on?

I mean: *whts rly rlly goin on?*

Who is this woman?

I have no idea who she could be. She could be a farmer's secretary in Christiana or Kokstad, the owner of a B&B in Underberg or Kimberley, a woman behind a shop counter in Vryburg, Bloemhof or Rosetta, a restaurant owner in Petrusburg or Weenen. Someone in the Free State, Northwest, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, Gauteng, the Northern Cape or KwaZulu-Natal.

My husband's job takes him to the four corners of the country, and he is often away for days, weeks, even months, at a time. It

is a lifestyle that invites a man to have affairs. This is one of the reasons why I just had to trust him, or my life would have been hell. Will my life be hell from now on?

I am hovering on the verge of hysteria. Adrenalin pumps through my body.

Keira, my friend, comes over to help. We sit next to the house on the little unfinished patio that Chips started building last year and hasn't finished. It is next to an uncompleted room that is supposed to be converted into a study and a bathroom. Our bedroom next to it is also unfinished, although we have been sleeping in it for a year.

Everywhere around us are other signs of neglect. In our unfinished cupboards, which Chips started building a year ago, there are rough, loose planks covered with tablecloths and other pieces of fabric. The planks were supposed to be temporary.

After repeated headaches, I took off the old mouldy bamboo blind above my side of the bed one morning and replaced it with an ethnic tablecloth; after months, it is still hanging there. There are no curtains in front of the remaining blinds. There are no electrical wall plugs; extension cords snake across the floor.

My husband is the practical one. When I want to change something about the house, he usually has other, better plans. So I leave the practical stuff to him and wait for him to get around to it. He'll do it eventually, I tell myself. Poor man, he works so hard; he travels so much. He is always so tired.

Now, sitting here, I look at these bits of unfinished business with new eyes. Aren't these the signs of a husband whose head and heart and body have been somewhere else – with another woman – for some time already? Still, I hope that there will be an explanation for all of this. The SMS is probably innocent, I tell myself. He couldn't possibly be having an affair – not my Chips.