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I Had An Affair With My Straight, Married Neighbor. Then His Wife Emailed Me.



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I Had An Affair With My Straight, Married...

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The email came from out of the blue a few months ago. It was from the wife of a man I had been secretly involved with. “How long did your affair with my husband last?” she demanded to know. “I’d like the date range of the years, please.”

I always wondered what she knew, if anything. Why was she confronting me now? I hadn’t communicated with her husband — I’ll call him Mike — in more than five years. We live on separate coasts now.

“The least you can do is respond truthfully, given what you’ve done,” she wrote. Was she accusing me of turning her husband gay? Of breaking up their marriage?

That fiery email may have been written in haste. Still, it was years in the making. I now know that deception has a long life span and often returns to claim its guilt.

I never told anyone about my affair with her husband. Too much at stake. Not so much for me — I was unattached, and my sexual orientation wasn’t a secret. Mike, on the other hand, was a devoted family man with two kids who I know loved his wife.

He was my next-door neighbor, and I did not seduce him, even though I was 20 years older than he was. I’m certain I was the first man he’d been intimate with, while I had, as they say, been around. Our affair wasn’t a sudden, passion-filled trip to the moon on gossamer wings. It was more like a long train ride. It started slowly and lasted some five years.

Mike wasn’t the only married man I’d been involved with. But the others were one-nighters or friends with benefits — eager conspirators.

Mike was another story.

We were opposites in many ways: I was a magazine editor. He was a master carpenter. I liked the arts. He liked sports. I splurged on nice clothes and twice-monthly haircuts. He dressed in whatever was handy, usually cut-offs, T-shirts, Birkenstocks and a tool belt.

One night when his wife and kids were away, we went to see a movie about a giant meteor heading for Earth. He told me that he was 16 before he ever saw a movie. He had seen it on the sly because his parents were evangelicals and movies, TV, and pop music were all considered tools of the devil.



cast-iron farmer's sink, a pulley for hauling ice to the second-floor window. He explained to me the building's ingenious post and beam construction.

I once showed him a wood inlaid jewelry box that depicted a family playing cards around a kitchen table. My great-grandmother brought it from Germany. "It's beautiful," he told me, gently running his fingers over the different woods. "Don't ever give it away."

My Victorian flat always needed repair. I had no idea how to install ceiling fans or fix doorbells. Mike did. He once spent a week patiently refinishing the beadboard in my kitchen. He made the century-old wood glisten like new using only sandpaper and baby oil.

We were friends for several years before becoming lovers.

“

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With his wavy black hair, cobalt eyes and droopy eyelashes, Mike had no idea how sexy he was, or could be. Yet his lack of vanity only enhanced his allure. I once stuffed him into my tuxedo when his wife insisted he accompany her to her workplace's black-tie event. Put a martini in his hand and he could have been James Bond.

Mike would drop by my place after his wife and kids were in bed. We would watch baseball games, make popcorn. Sometimes we'd share a joint, which deepened our enjoyment of "Antiques Roadshow."

I agreed to let Mike set up his saws and tools in my attic after he told me he couldn't afford to rent a workshop. That meant seeing him at all hours.

There were signs, some blatant, that he was struggling with his sexuality. Like the time he told me he had gone on a porn site to see how gay men "do it." He confided to me that when he was in college, he had been attracted to another male student but didn't act on it.



A mutual hug in my attic one afternoon changed everything.

Even after our relationship became physical, it took months for Mike to feel comfortable kissing. I've known couples, gay and straight, who were in open relationships. Many made a pact that they could mess around with others as long as they didn't kiss. Sex can be a purely tactile, pleasurable experience. But kissing is up close and personal.

My nights were as free as his. I was in my 50s and I had outgrown discos and late-night bars. There was no Grindr back then. Craigslist was in its infancy. I could no longer bear meeting faceless strangers from newspaper ads.

I didn't know Mike's wife well, despite our being neighbors. She wasn't the social type. Books, cats and gardening were her pleasures.

"What if she finds out about us?" I asked Mike.

I've been cheated on in several relationships, so I know how it feels.

"I wouldn't worry about it. She's not a confrontational person," he said. "The other night, she told me she was tired and suggested I go hang out with my butt buddy."

"What did she mean by that?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," he replied.

I was, or so I thought. I figured that on some level, she was OK with this good-neighbor policy. That helped ease my conscience.

Besides, I wasn't out to steal her husband, even though same-sex marriage did become legal in our state in 2004.

I wasn't being completely honest when I said I never told anyone about Mike and me. My downstairs neighbor, who I had become close friends with over the years, figured it out. She could hear Mike's footsteps coming and going on the stairwell, the squeak of bedsprings. "Mike's a good person," she told me. "You're helping him become his true self. You should feel no guilt."

I've never had children or wanted them. Mike's, however, were a joy to be with. I worked from



them to their swim lessons. We'd go bowling, miniature golfing. They introduced me to "SpongeBob SquarePants."

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Mike was always struggling to make ends meet. Yet not having money didn't matter when it came to his boys. He gave them something dollars can't buy: his time and attention. He once spent a day with them riding the subway lines. He got them memberships to a science museum. He taught them to Rollerblade and play hockey. I would go with them on weekend hikes. I would bring my dog and lunch. His wife never wanted to go along.

I lent Mike and his wife a down payment to buy a house. It felt good to do something positive for his family. His wife worked out a payment plan, which she stuck to. Mike converted the basement of his new digs to a workshop. Despite living in a different neighborhood, he still came by.

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I can't give a precise date when it all came crashing down. All I know is there were no more late-night visits, trips to Home Depot or those delicious foot rubs that he voluntarily gave. Mike simply disappeared without a goodbye. My phone calls went unanswered. He blocked



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Desperate for an answer, I bravely — and foolishly — called his wife. “What’s going on with Mike?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” she said. “He never mentions you.”

Our train ride had come to its final station.

I had to take an honest look at myself. What I needed was a real boyfriend, one who I could go to the theater with. Or to restaurants. One who wouldn’t leave me waiting for him to come by on a Saturday night, only not to show up. One who I could tell my friends and co-workers about.

One who was available.

Then one afternoon, four years later, I saw Mike. I was taking my dog for a walk, cutting through a baseball field that abuts a wooded area. He was lobbing softballs over home plate to his boys. Seeing me, he trotted over to where I was. He took off his Red Sox cap. “I’m getting a little gray,” he said. I said nothing.

“I’m sorry,” he said, shaking my hand. “Really sorry.”

“C’mon, dad,” his boys yelled, and with that, Mike jogged back to the pitcher’s mound.

I finally had my explanation. His boys were becoming young men, old enough to ask questions and figure things out.

I should have foreseen this scenario. During the 1990s I lived in the Deep South. The steam room and sauna at my local Y served as a kind of after-work social club for men who were gay — and for those who had wives and kids.

I would sometimes ask these men why they got married. “I wanted a family. I wanted children” was the usual reply. I asked one devoted father why he stayed in the South when he could have moved to a blue state. “I couldn’t live more than a few miles from my mama and daddy,” he said.

I knew a gay impresario when I lived in San Francisco in the 1980s. One night he threw a dinner party for his gay circle of friends at Trader Vic’s. Over tropical cocktails, he announced that he had just gotten engaged to a divorcee with two girls. “I’m going to have a family now.”





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I didn't respond to Mike's wife's angry email. I figured that was Mike's job, since he's the one who came out to her and told her about us. He knew the dates of our affair as well as I did.

But I did need to know what was up. So I nervously texted him. We hadn't communicated since that day on the baseball field.

“We're going through a nasty divorce,” Mike texted back. “I decided to finally be honest with myself. I needed to be who I am. I told her about us. She blames you for everything. She wanted to know how many men I'd been with. I said there was only you, and that's the truth.”

“Every time I pass by your place, I think of you,” he wrote. “I've missed you.”

“I've missed you too,” I replied.

“Do your boys know?” I asked. They would be young men now.

“I told them. They were fine with it.”

“You were a great father to them,” I told him.

“Now you've got me all teared up,” he replied.

Mike volunteered that he was in therapy. He said he had joined a bisexual men's support group. He met a man there, he said, whom he found attractive and who had asked him out.

I felt a twinge of sadness. I didn't tell Mike that. Instead, I wished him all the best in his new life, and I meant it.

I had a new life too. I had sold my place and moved to the California desert, where I knew no one. A few weeks after buying a small condo, I went to a paint store to check out color samples. A younger salesman waited on me. He looked to be in his early 40s.



He intercepted me in the parking lot as I was heading toward my car. He handed me a piece of yellow paper that he had hastily scribbled his cellphone number on. "If you ever need anything, just call," he said. "And I mean anything."

"You're married," I said. He shrugged his shoulders.

Nights can be lonely. His invitation was tempting.

I took the piece of paper out of my pocket, wadded it up and deposited it in the nearest trash bin.

John Stark is a veteran journalist and editor who has had staff positions on the San Francisco Examiner/Chronicle, People magazine, Cooking Light magazine, Martha Stewart's Body + Soul, Cooks Illustrated and Walking magazine. His freelance stories have appeared in such publications as The New York Times, Newsday, AARP magazine and The Boston Globe. He was a founding editor of PBS' "Next Avenue" website for boomers, where for three years he wrote weekly blogs and features, and continues to write for the site. He holds a master's in journalism from Boston University and is a licensed Realtor. He currently lives in Palm Springs, California, where he is retired but writes freelance stories. For more info, visit JohnRStark.net.

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