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BY KAY CARTER

I don't know what I expected to happen when I emailed the woman with whom my husband had a two-week, sex-filled fling to snarkily chide her for not being a better feminist. I suppose I thought I was being clever, that one year post-affair I'd found an inventive way to deal her an identity-shattering blow, similar to the one she had dealt me.

Unfortunately, when I hit send I forgot that one person's dogged self-interest is another person's third wave feminism. And instead of knocking her down a few notches, I believe I inadvertently built her up.

Being betrayed by a person you love is all too clichéd. It's a subject that has been combed through many times over in Russian novels, on daytime television and in *Mars vs. Venus* pop psychology. These days, even academia is getting in on the action.

In Lauren Rosewarne's *Cheating on the Sisterhood: Infidelity and Feminism*, the feminist-cum-political scientist uses her own experience as the other woman in a typical hetero-normative affair to interrogate claims that have been made about adultery and to add a few new positions. The central question Rosewarne asks is this: Can cheating be an act of feminist resistance? The answer, as you might imagine, is quite complex—more so than even Rosewarne is able to detail in her 270-page rumination. (In her defence, she is explicit about her intention to maintain a self-informed, myopic perspective at the expense of a more expansive study.)

Born less than a month apart (thanks Facebook!), Rosewarne and I grew up in the same era of feminism. We learned that women can have both careers and a family from Diane Keaton in *Baby Boom*, we railed against the male-dominated

music industry with Ani DiFranco and riot grrrls, and we read Audre Lorde, Leslie Feinberg and Michelle Tea while wearing purple fishnets and thigh-high pleather boots. We buzzed our heads, grew our body hair and swore off makeup, only to return to femme with a vengeance when our queer sex worker friend convinced us makeup was radical if you knew how to wield it properly.

Our anger was righteous and coated with glitter, and we shared it with strangers through the Interwebs. Empowerment was anything we wanted it to be, and we shrieked with choice-filled delight as our metaphorical second wave mothers gasped in admonition. And that was all well and good for a time ... until some of us realized our metaphorical mothers might actually be right about a thing or two.

At some point, Rosewarne's and my contemporaries started to reel in the all-inclusive pleasure-seeking to consider the larger ramifications of recasting former markers of sexism and misogyny as modern-day empowerment. As Rosewarne writes, third wave feminism had a "fixation with making inequality palatable." In doing so, she believes, "the fundamental tenet of feminism—that power between men and women is unevenly distributed—[got] lost" because "in an environment where nothing is ever completely wrong, the status quo of sexual inequality remains unchallenged." In other words, Rosewarne's and my cohorts were so busy trying to create a one-size-fits-all movement that we forgot that resistance and transgression are, by definition, an outsider's game. And who is a better example of an outsider than the other woman?

Most of us are familiar with the Western heterosexual script of love and desire, and even as a woman betrayed I have to admit that I have been

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somewhat persuaded by the argument that other women can successfully buck gender norms—at least to some degree. Other women thwart the traditional feminine role of the self-sacrificing, restrained and virtuous woman whose relationship revolves around becoming a wife. They upset compulsory heterosexuality by engaging in an unscripted, socially taboo relationship. As far as sex itself goes, other women are active sexual agents who debunk the myth that ladies only want it for love, that visceral longing is simply a guy thing. By engaging in a relationship with a married (or monogamously coupled) man, the other woman can keep her needs central to the situation, get the good parts without having to put up with the bad, and manoeuvre the tryst in a way that facilitates her own personal and sexual liberation. She can act like a man, in other words.

Nonetheless, I believe this is a short-sighted perspective that requires a lot of theoretical assumptions that don't tend to play themselves out in real life. They certainly didn't play out for Rosewarne, and they didn't play out for the other woman with whom my husband had an affair.

Let me back up and give you a bit more context for my particular situation. After seven years of what appeared to be a satisfying and healthy relationship, I kissed my husband goodbye before what would have been a 10-week separation while he went to another country to complete a short-term academic program. A week after he arrived, he began a sexual relationship with one of the other students in the course. I learned of the affair and confronted him about it after another two weeks had passed. Knowing that he owed me more than a transcontinental breakup, he boarded a plane and returned home the following morning.

The days after his return were some of the hardest I've lived through—not because I'd been deceived by the man I thought I'd spend the rest of my life with, but because I realized the extent to which I had been deceiving myself prior to his leaving.

To be a “good feminist” is to be a strong woman, and I had gotten good at wearing that facade. Learning about the affair forced me to face some really uncomfortable truths about my relationships to feminism, myself and other women. My other woman was disturbingly like the person I was then in so many ways—a feminist smarty-pants with a proclivity for intersectional activism, one with a wickedly sharp sense of humour and a talent for linguistic manipulation.

But even more unsettling for me were the ways we weren't alike, because they touched on so many of the internal places I didn't feel at ease. She was short and skinny; I was tall and thick. She was a wealthy, foreign-born academic whose sexual appetite was seemingly unquenched; I was semi-reformed poor white trash who lucked into going to college and was too self-conscious and rape-damaged to have uninhibited sex. I despised her and wanted to be her—all the classic tropes. Another thing was different, however. In addition to feeling betrayed by my husband, I also felt cheated by the sisterhood.

Feminist author Robin Morgan taught me that sisterhood is global, but the other woman showed me something entirely different. She showed me that the concept of sisterhood is nothing but a charade that helps provide the illusion of a large-scale, homogenous, interconnected feminist movement. That lesson was one gigantic bitter pill to swallow.

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The other woman, shared anatomy or not, had no connection to me. In writing to her, I had wanted her to express unsolicited guilt or remorse. But she didn't—and really, why should she? She had no compelling reason to put some vague sense of vaginal solidarity ahead of her own immediate self-gratification. Thus, she went after what she wanted, because that's what good feminists do. Feminism, many would say, is about winning and boosting one's self-esteem. Some would therefore find it acceptable, even laudable, to accomplish those personal goals, even at another woman's expense. Truthfully, reconciling one's self-serving desires with building a more just world is quite a struggle to manage—another personal-is-political, theory-versus-action dilemma.

In the aftermath of the affair, I had my own feminist dilemmas to sort through, such as whether or not to stay with a man whose hurtful actions had demonstrated so little regard for me. In a patriarchy, as Rosewarne says, women are taught to expect, want and demand less. While Rosewarne used opposition to this sentiment to justify her right to be the other woman, I claimed it to rebuild my relationship—this time with more transparency and more realistic expectations.

Men have a history of using infidelity as a swift exit strategy from an unsatisfying relationship. My husband and I each had to make a choice: stay and do the hard work—individually, and as a couple—or part ways and leave it to chance that we wouldn't repeat our mistakes with future partners. I chose to stay and do the work.

The affair created an opportunity to alter the dynamic of our relationship, an opportunity that has yielded some pretty amazing results. For example, I'm no longer the controlling breadwinner

and he's no longer the inept man-child. Our task-sharing goes beyond evenly divvying up the household chores and extends to divvying up mutual emotional support and negotiating our personal needs. We communicate with more empathy and honesty than we once did.

Yet there was still another struggle that needed to be surpassed—and this was one I had to deal with on my own. "When someone chooses to remain in a difficult relationship and tries to improve it, we more readily classify her as having low self-esteem, as dependent and clinging, as having no real backbone," Rosewarne states. Given this popular construction of victims of infidelity, there is an inherent conflict in being a feminist woman betrayed.

The hardest part of moving beyond the affair has been the way my self-concept and feminist identity were affected. One outcome of my experience is that "feminist" is a term I no longer apply to myself. Laden with its own baggage, I felt an oppressive sense of shame about having been a feminist woman betrayed who chose to stay with a betrayer, and my feminist friends had nary a word of support for my staying when times were most tough. They refused to acknowledge the strength it takes to rectify one's own mistakes and to accept a flawed partner who is trying to do the same.

The feminist inside me couldn't let go of the rigid standards of "good feminist" behaviour, so I decided to let her go instead and forge my own nameless path. It's still a work in progress, but one that feels more authentic and better aligned with my politics. ❀

*Kay Carter is a pseudonym for a long-time feminist writer who is a frequent contributor to Herizons.*