

The Tangled Web

✖ A chill crept over me as I stared at the computer screen in disbelief. I struggled to comprehend the e-mail I had just opened. It was clearly a love letter, and its contents made it obvious the writer and addressee had been intimate over a long period of time. The incomprehensible part: This e-mail was signed by my husband—and it was not addressed to me.

The e-mail explained why, 10 days before, our lives had taken a devastating turn. We had spent a beautiful, sunny January day picnicking at a riverside park with our son. Later, after Trevor* had run off to play at a neighbor's and I had started cooking dinner, my husband, George*, appeared in the doorway of the kitchen, suitcase in hand.

The blow of his brutally calm words shocked me: "I don't love you anymore. I'm leaving."

This man—who had told me he loved me every day for 25 years, gently cradled our babies in his arms, held vigil beside my hospital bed through cancer surgeries and chemo, and even cried over the pain I'd experienced—now seemed to delight in seeing his painful words pierce my heart.

"I haven't loved you for a long time," he said, watching my

reaction closely.

"What do you mean, you don't love me? How long have you not loved me?" I cried in bewilderment.

"Why do you have to know that?" he coldly replied.

"Because you're not only destroying our future, you're destroying our past!" For all I knew, our whole marriage was disappearing down the drain.

"Oh, stop being so melodramatic," was all George would say.

The Web

A much-loved ministry leader and family man for more than two decades, George had been decent to a fault. This was a man who shoveled widows' driveways after snowstorms, organized and led missions trips, and spent Saturday mornings happily riding our 6-year-old son around on the lawn mower. A romantic, he often took me out for coffee or dinner and always called me four or five times a day when he traveled, saying he "just wanted to hear my voice."

But this day, as I read George's cyber love-note, a different picture of my husband began to emerge. The chill of his deceptions spread from my chest to the tips of my ice-cold fingers and toes.

Why didn't I know? I chided myself. To a more sophisticated woman, George's growing preoccupation with the Internet might have provided some clues. However, since he used the

Internet in
his consulting business, I saw no reason to doubt his
explanation.

His nightly trips downstairs to “watch a little TV until
I get sleepy” might have been a red flag, but I thought his
“trouble
sleeping” just indicated he needed less caffeine, more
exercise and
maybe an appointment with our family doctor. The idea that
George could
be using the wee morning hours to get involved online with a
woman who
lived a thousand miles away never occurred to me. I trusted
him
implicitly.

Moreover, because I had no interest in the maze of the
World Wide Web, I certainly had no idea of the tangled threads
of
temptation lurking there. Now, though, I was faced with a
scary
reality: George had left us for an Internet lover.

For days after he left, I moved about as in a trance,
barely managing to perform everyday tasks. When I wasn’t
trying to
comfort my heartbroken, bewildered kindergartner, I was on my
face
before God, hanging on to Him as my only lifeline.

One afternoon when I was alone, I felt crushed to the
breaking point by what was happening. Seared by the pain of
broken
trust, I collapsed on the living room couch, trying to block
out the
agony of the thought that George might have been lying to me
during the

entire 25 years of our marriage.

“Oh, God,” I sobbed, “all those years he said he loved me—he was lying all that time!”

As clearly and unexpectedly as if a bell had rung in the room, I heard God say, “But I wasn’t.”

For a short time, all went absolutely calm inside me. I sat up, aware that I’d heard directly from the Lord, that He was there in the room with me, saying He loved me and meaning it. Though the absolute confidence I’d had in George had been violently ripped away, God was beginning the process of replacing it with real security—in Him.

Painful Revelations

Soon after I found the e-mail, my pastor and I met with George to try to reconcile our marriage. Though our motives were good and our approach gentle, my pastor and I were both naive about how dramatically sexual sin—even cyber-sex—can twist a person’s thinking. George repeatedly denied that there was another woman involved.

When I finally handed him a copy of the e-mail, he read it silently, his face flushing dark red.

“Oh, God, what have I done?” he cried, his face in his hands. “I betrayed you; I wrecked our marriage....” His voice trailed off into sobs, and I felt sure God was working. This was exactly what

I'd prayed for: brokenness, repentance, restoration.

George suddenly lifted his head and glared at us. "But I'm never coming back! I love her."

This yo-yo pattern of brokenness-followed-by-belligerence continued for the next six months. It was an unspeakably painful time

but, as my husband pulled away, God drew me closer to Himself.

After each new, cruel revelation of George's unfaithfulness, I would settle my son to play in the family room and

run upstairs, falling on my knees beside the bed. As I pleaded for God

to intervene, the pain would disappear—sometimes instantly—long enough

to allow me to catch my breath and absorb more strength from Him. He

never failed me.

After long periods of prayer and waiting on God, I was convinced I had to remain open to forgiveness and reconciliation,

something I could do only by His power. So I didn't object when George

came after work to eat dinner with Trevor and me. Many times we fell

back into our former pattern of long, intimate conversations in front

of the fireplace after Trevor was asleep.

During these conversations, I began to understand that an e-mail sexual relationship can destroy far more than a marriage and a

home; it can destroy the very people involved. Until this time, I'd

felt sure that George's leaving was caused by some lack in me.

Many

women face this painful feeling of self-doubt, and since none of us is

a perfect mate, there are always some grounds for self-accusation. My

pastor, trying to help, had even counseled me to find out what the

other woman was giving George that I wasn't providing.

However, what I saw during those after-dinner

conversations made me suspect that the real problem was not between

George and me, but between George and God. I saw a deviant side of my

husband now that unnerved me.

He swore openly and frequently used sexually crude

expressions. His demeanor toward, and conversation about, other women

now had sexual overtones. He admitted to frequenting bars regularly

and, for the first time ever, I saw him drunk. I couldn't help remembering how, at his urging, we'd prayed fervently together in Bible

college for one of his relatives who drank. Now he was the one who

needed prayer.

As bad as his behavior was, even worse was what he said

about God. Once an ardent student of theology, George had characterized

himself when we first met as "a man in love with Jesus Christ," and

that love showed in everything he did. Now, he spoke bitterly of how

the church had "damaged" him. He insisted that he still believed in God

but that most of what we'd been taught about Him was wrong.

I continued to learn new details about George's long-distance affair. From the other woman's jilted husband, I got a more complete picture of my husband's obsessive e-mail and phone sexual relationship.

When my pastor and I had confronted him, George had insisted that he'd met the woman only recently and that she was divorced; but according to my new information, the affair had been going on for over a year, and she was still very much married. When faced with the facts, George admitted, shamefacedly, that this new information was correct—he'd been lying yet again.

In a quarter-century of marriage, I'd come to believe George was beyond unfaithfulness, and that had always affected the way I prayed for him in the past. Now I understand that even the strongest and best people can fall, and my prayers for each member of my family reflect that possibility.

It has been 3-1/2 years since George left. He lives openly with the woman he met on the Internet, since the divorce he's pursuing has been held up in the court system.

All our assets were in his name, so I was left with virtually no resources. Though sometimes the financial situation can look terrifying, God continues to provide the money we need, usually in ways I could never anticipate.

For a long time after my marriage was torn apart, I felt as if life was not worth living. But eventually, after I began the long, hard work of healing, joy crept back into my days. I discovered that God is the source of all joy and meaning and my real reason for living. Going on is possible because according to Romans 8:38-39, nothing—no betrayal, no hurt, however immense—can ever separate us from the faithful love of God.

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*Not his or her real name