

Scandals

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By *Laura Kipnis*



Tiger Woods

This was the first and last time she would tell her story in public, **People** assured its readers last week about the "fiercely private golden girl" Elin Nordegren, now officially severed from former husband Tiger Woods, who, as the world knows, conducted himself in a not particularly elegant manner with a string of talky paramours. To date, more than a dozen have come forward with their grievances, their reminiscences, and copies of Tiger's text messages where available, for some public score-settling. His ex had some scores to settle too, though she was more subtle in her approach. I don't mean to minimize Elin's ordeal, but it's one of the interesting paradoxes of our times that someone can be referred to in all apparent earnestness as "fiercely private" while also publicizing her private pain in a mass-circulation periodical.

Which leaves me wondering: Did Tiger have a particular penchant for sexual and romantic partners who would subsequently feel the need to share their experiences with the world? Is this now a "type," like a preference for blondes or the especially well-endowed—both so heavily featured in the photo gallery of Tiger's **past mistresses**, it was hard not to notice. Or is all this sharing just an ineluctable sign of our fast-moving digitally driven scandal-hungry times? Much has been said about the evaporating distinction between public and private, which is transforming the social landscape so radically that none of us are yet in a position to calculate the effects. As Brecht once said, "It is scarcely possible to conceive of the laws of motion if one looks at them from a tennis ball's point of view." When it comes to the evaporation of privacy, at the moment we're the tennis balls.

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One thing is sure: The use of the public sphere to negotiate previously shrouded matters like sexual disappointment is definitely on the rise. Once we read novels to understand the conditions of private life; this is no longer necessary as we're bombarded with highly detailed narratives about the emotional problems of other people, with hardly a crevice left unexplored. Which brings us to the issue of celebrity sexual privilege, another previously shrouded and now very public topic, as well as the motif of this particular scandal. Clearly the rules are changing in this realm, too, which might be worth thinking about, especially if you happen to be a celebrity or hope to become one someday. Sadly, the traditional sexual entitlements of the role come with new disincentives, namely that your one-night-stand mate is likely to be tweeting about your performance or preferences before the sheets are dry, or snapping **naked cell-phone photos** of you while asleep, to deploy as necessary should you neglect to call the next day or otherwise prove a let-down. (Of course, even non-celebs have cause for concern on this front: Avoiding bodily fluid exchanges with **bloggers** is this decade's version of safe sex.)

But the tough lesson for celebrities, if the Tiger scandal is any indication, is that the fans and admirers most drawn to these high-wattage hook-ups appear to be the same cohort most inclined to sell you out later. If I were a married sports icon or any scandal-avoidant celeb, I'd want to note the correlation. Serial philanderers and sexual compulsives need to be better psychologists in the age of Twitter if they want to keep

out of scandals. Perhaps this is the quality that separates those who get exposed and nationally censured from those who don't? By which I mean: Is Tiger really the only sports hero there's something to tweet about? One suspects not.

So let's put on our psychologist hats and ponder this question. What exactly is the allure of sex with celebs, especially married ones who want to keep your existence a secret though maybe they'll text you next time they're back in town *if* they can get away? No doubt there's attraction: Celebrities are frequently **charismatic**; they have an aura; sometimes (though not always) they're good-looking. No doubt there's the feeling of "a connection," a "special spark." But the main benefit, as anyone with experience of such things knows, is that it confers *specialness* on the lucky recipient of the celeb's attention: "He/she could choose *anyone*, and he/she chose *me*."

The problem is that anyone who craves the proximity of celebrity limelight and feels confirmed by hit-or-miss attentions is also likely to be someone afflicted by greater than usual quantities of insecurity and self-doubt. Possibly also someone hoping a bit of that limelight will magically rub off, improving life in some unspecified fashion. Unfortunately it doesn't usually work that way, as one quickly realizes the morning after as the now less-attentive celeb prepares to jet to the next city to greet the next admiring horde. Who wouldn't feel a little ill-used?

If feeling affirmed by the celebrity's aura is a sexual turn-on and confidence builder, are such motives transparent to those who possess them? Studying the photo arrays of Tiger's mistresses for insights about who they are reveals certain commonalities. There's an insistent sexiness—a lot of bikinis, pouting, tousled hair, and perilously low-cut outfits. Tiger seemed to favor a certain physical type, it was widely (and leeringly) noted. But it seems to me more like a common personality type that the photos display: women whose calling card is hotness and who aspire to get things back from the world on that basis—attention, affirmation, riches hopefully, and perhaps even love, but willing to settle for whatever's on offer.

Obviously we all work with what allures and talents we have to get things back from the world, but making hotness your calling card is a precarious choice: It makes you a little interchangeable; newer models keep coming out. There's also the problem of misrepresentation. The advertised hotness isn't really about liberated sex at all; it's the

far more traditional variety: sex as exchange value, to get something in return—perhaps not a marriage proposal, but at least a status jump. It had to be insulting to see the photos of the dozen other mistresses and realize you were one of a small crowd, even if you'd been savvy enough to know you probably weren't exactly unique. Two of the girlfriends were insulted enough to hire self-described feminist lawyer Gloria Allred (previous aggrieved client: Paula Jones) to demand Tiger publicly apologize to *them* after he publicly apologized to his wife. There was also some **limelight** to seize, of course. Injured by Tiger, they were out to return the injury, though what seemed missing from the calculus was a realistic understanding of either the man on the other side of the bed or the perimeters of the celebrity-bedding enterprise generally.

Through the carnival atmosphere, what haunts these scenes is mutual misrecognition. The famously cynical quote from French psychoanalyst **Jacques Lacan** about love comes to mind: "Love is giving something one doesn't have to someone who doesn't want it." Love is about mistaken identity, in other words: What we love are our projections. When transposed to the sphere of celebrity love, the same levels of occlusion clearly apply. Whether it was sexual encounters or product endorsements he was being enlisted for, Tiger wasn't who his admirers and corporate overseers needed him to be. When his fans found out that a talent for hitting a small ball into a hole with a long stick doesn't necessarily correlate with honesty or integrity, there was shock and dismay (along with \$22 million in lost product endorsements). *Everyone* had misrecognized Tiger, it turned out, including his wife, who arranged the cover story in *People* because she wanted the world to know she'd had no idea who she was really married to.

All scandals expose some sort of gap between surfaces and what really drives people. If we didn't invest so heavily in surfaces and have such a love-hate relationship with unvarnished truths, scandal would cease to exist. The distance between Tiger's boy scout image and the off-the-greens sexcapades was obviously a scandal waiting to happen. But more to the point, Tiger seems to have gravitated toward precisely the companions most likely to ensure it did happen. As we see over and over in scandals: People really *are* their own worst enemies. Guilty secrets seek outlets. And who doesn't have a few guilty secrets?