

## The Joy of Snooping

I'm at someone's house for the first time and she's just run off to do an errand, leaving me alone in her bedroom. It's me, a queen-sized bed, and two monolithic Victorian nightstands, one on each side of the bed. The only other things in the room are a half-open closet with a fuzzy white sweater sleeve sticking out, an orderly wardrobe with a decorative (?) keyhole in one of the doors, and one of those cheesy singing fish gadgets hanging on the wood-panel walls. There's definitely the residue of some kind of rosy perfume floating around. I peek out the door. My acquaintance is gone taking out the trash.

I shouldn't. I can't. What if she comes back in right now and catches me? No, no, I won't, not this time. A lot of voices in my head try, they really do. The God of my childhood lectures me on dishonesty between friends, but his moralizing got old way back in middle school. My parents are in there, asking me how I would feel if someone went through my nightstand drawers. The answer: fucking horrible. I have private pictures, journals, and some computer passwords in there. But...this isn't my room or my nightstand. Mom can't argue with that logic. Even my own personal ethical sense, an amorphous glob of kindergarten teachers, parents, God, PBS specials, and some evolved group survival genes, tells me that to break this person's implied trust and dig through her personal stuff is...you know, wrong.

I can't resist. I make for the nightstand drawer. My heart races, my palms sweat, and my ears perk at every creak of the floorboard, every slam of a door, as I keep watch for the return of this poor "friend." The un-lacquered wood of the drawer grumbles across the tracks. After a moment of terrified silence to see if anyone heard that, I relax a little. I'm in.

What do we have here? I see two condoms, some half-empty birth control packets, and a little pink vibrator. Yeah, okay, breaking news. They have sex. Big deal. But there is that tiny tingle of pleasure that comes with the renewed knowledge that the person downstairs dragging a garbage can to her curb actually mounts someone and allows his monstrously erect...well, you know the images. Do they do it to the sounds of the singing fish? So many scenarios! I think about picking them up, but then decide against it. Underneath a Bible—the condoms, by the way, are shoved deeper underneath this—I see the most humiliating thing in the entire drawer and, indeed, in all nightstand drawers: a self-help book. *When Am I Going to be Happy?: How to Break the Emotional Bad Habits that Make you Miserable*, with its signature huge letters on the

front, sits slightly askew of the Bible. I have to actually lift the Bible a little to see it, which is very distressing. And next to that is some kind of picture of...

The stairs creak, and I can hear her humming a Beatles song. Quick, close the drawer, oh God, it will make a noise, oh God, I'm going to get caught, oh God, I have to stop doing this, close it, don't make noise, tell her you thought you heard a mouse...okay, it's closed, she doesn't appear to have heard it, sit on the bed, look innocent, act natural..."hey, how was taking out the garbage?"

And it's over. I'm a little disappointed that I didn't get to the closet. There's only a little guilt. I've blocked most of it from my neuronal inbox by now.

Up until now, I've only told a select group of people about this habit, and one of them was someone whose sock drawer I dismembered during my first visit (disappointment: no drunk pictures or hidden black lingerie). First, she asked me if I'd ever snooped in her stuff. I said no. She looked skeptical. Then she asked me why in the world I do this. To be honest, I'm really surprised that more people don't understand. Am I the only one that hears the siren song of nightstands, sock drawers, medicine cabinets, and closets? It could be that everyone else is lying, too, and that Samantha from *Sex and the City* is right: Most relationships are based on firm foundations of lies and mutually-accepted delusions. In any case, after thoroughly reviewing the evidence, I've decided that the most successful course of action for dealing with these sorts of obsessions and habits is to find a socially-acceptable outlet for them. Luckily, there are quite a few for us snoopers. I chose Archaeology.

How could I ever resist digging through ancient temples or tombs, walking freely through places where ancient peoples would have had to traverse mazes and guards' arrows? All of their little sacred goods—pottery, incense burners, holy statues—are just sketches in field books and fodder for gawking tourists at some godforsaken museum. There are no more guards to shoot you, no more mazes, no more cultural ideology mandating death for anyone intruding on the temple or disturbing the ruler's bones and guts. Everyone's dead, their crappy little civilization is dead. It's just a little research site now, funded by some foundation in New York with a board full of old men. How could I not enjoy every sneaked step I take through these former "forbidden" places, relishing every moment I can walk somewhere that used to be considered the realm of the gods? How could I not savor every mound of dirt that further reveals their pathetic secrets?

And stuff they left behind? *I'll find it!* Clothing, golden jewelry, phallic statues, little wheeled toys, the detritus of fires—no dead man's secrets are safe anymore! I want to climb into the cave where the Oracle at Delphi once sat, go through the bottoms of the temples where specialists did all those fire and water tricks that ancient city-dwellers thought was magic. It's like a huge medicine cabinet, except it's an entire city's medicine cabinet, and nobody's standing outside telling you to stay out of the drawers.

The real danger with archaeology, of course, is finding what I usually find in downstairs medicine cabinets: NOTHING. On digs, snoopers usually find something, and if it's not an artifact, it's probably trouble. Archaeologist Robert Wenke describes making "several trips into the deserts of the southern Fayyum without finding much except a restaurant in the provincial capital, where I got deathly ill for only 90 piastres." There are always dangers in rummaging through other people's stuff, though. It's largely a matter of scale. In these cases, the justifications for disturbing these sites is somewhat historical, but it's also pretty unabashedly about snooping. It's kind of like eavesdropping on history's phone calls.

In the end, I did eventually get into my new "friend's" closet during a different visit. The only thing of real potential I found there was a diary, which I'm glad to report I didn't read. Even the most ardent of snoopers does have limits. Reading the documents of some dead pharaoh who's only dried skin and bones is different than reading the diary of a living, breathing, eating human being who regularly lets you swim in her pool. But I can certainly tell a lot about a person by opening one of his or her "private" drawers. Ultimately, the most surprising thing about snooping is how much people keep hidden. Every day, each person wakes up, puts on a civilized façade, and uses it to deal with the world. When I snoop, I see the good, the bad, and ugly that lies beyond the façade.

So before you invite a new friend over to dinner, ask yourself: What does my nightstand drawer say about me? The answer may not be entirely pleasant. History, of course, is just one collective façade. Take pleasure in knowing that your nightstand drawer has nothing on what lies beneath that.